MEDIA PRACTICE AND NEW APPROACHES TO *MISE-EN-SCÈNE* AND *AUTEUR* THEORY IN BROADCAST RADIO

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Acknowledgements

Over this period of study I have had the privilege of working with many talented people and who, quite appropriately, are formally referenced in the main body of the thesis. I am enormously grateful for their creative contributions that have enabled me to produce this body of work. Special mention must go to the producer, directors, actors and technicians that worked so passionately on the radio plays I focus on here, especially my life-long friend and creative partner Gary Brown.

However, there are many more uncredited artists and friends - actors, writers, academic colleagues and family - that have informed and supported my professional acting and writing work over thirty-five years and to them I express deep appreciation.

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Abstract

This PhD by Published Work aims to present a coherent programme of original radio research practice produced by the author and placed in an appropriate academic context that explores new approaches to *mise-en-scène* and *auteur* theory. The research methodology employs an interrogation of traditional definitions of *mise-en-scène* and *auteur* and then reframes and adopts redefinitions of these theories when used to contextualise broadcast radio.

The portfolio consists of the scripts and broadcast recordings of a set of five original BBC Radio 4 plays, and includes reference to a set of related academic publications and conference papers in which critical reflection about the media and creative practice of writing the plays took place.

The work draws on approaching four decades of experience as a professional freelance writer and performer. The practice-based research focuses on explorations of the inter-relationships between the form, content and production of the five original radio dramas he was commissioned to write. All of the plays were broadcast by BBC Radio 4, the major public service arena available for radio drama in the United Kingdom, from 2000 to 2012. These years constituted a period of significant change in creative and administrative protocols at the BBC, and form the context for exploration of *auteur* innovations.

The dramas achieved considerable critical attention attracting favourable reviews and provoking public debate. For example, *Bell in the Ball* (2010) prompted a discussion concerning writing about disability on the BBC's *In Touch* programme (2010). It is a significant marker of their quality that a number of the plays have been repeated on various BBC Radio channels, as well as broadcast overseas.

As part of the critical interrogation of the author's media and creative practice, excerpts of the plays have also been included in academic papers presented at national and international conferences.

PART I

Critical Study

Introduction

> How many listeners have considered the great advancement which has been made in the power of 'seeing through the sense of hearing' since broadcasting began?
> (Smythe 1924, cited in Beck 2001)

As a professional freelance writer and performer for over 35 years, I have had the privilege of working on a large number of drama and comedy productions with many seminal writers, producers, directors and actors in the television, radio, film and theatre industries. These have included Mike Leigh, (film and stage director), Alan Bleasdale (television writer), Ken Russell (film director), Willy Russell (stage and television writer), Michael Wearing (television producer) and Rik Mayall (comedy performer). My experiences working with these practitioners has directly influenced and informed my practice-based research studies. Since the late 1990s, I have concentrated on writing and performing for radio principally because my long-held passion for the medium has increased with time. Radio drama's distinctive potential to create within the listening audience what the UK Radio Advertising Bureau called in 1993 the 'Theatre of the Mind' is a challenge I find as a writer and actor increasingly fulfilling.

The basis of this thesis is the presentation of a coherent programme of original radio research practice that I have produced since 1999. I have placed this research practice in an appropriate academic context to explore new approaches to *mise-en-scène* and *auteur* theory. My research methodology is constructed to interrogate traditional designations of *mise-en-scène* and *auteur* and then to reframe and adopt redefinitions of these theories when used to contextualise broadcast radio. My status as a commissioned BBC writer provides me with a particularly informed insight into the contemporary creative and production protocols governing broadcast radio. As a consequence, my practitioner status enables me to suggest fresh and original perspectives of *mise-en-scène* and *auteur* theory when applied to radio.
This research focuses particularly on explorations of the inter-relationships between the form, content and production of five original radio dramas I was commissioned to write for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). All of the plays were broadcast by BBC Radio 4, the major public service arena available for radio drama in the United Kingdom, from 2000 to 2012. These years constituted a period of significant change in creative and administrative protocols at the BBC, and form the context for exploration of *auteur* innovations.

The radio dramas achieved considerable critical attention attracting favourable reviews and provoking public debate. For example, *Bell in the Ball* (Peters, 2010) prompted a discussion concerning writing about disability on the Radio 4's *In Touch* programme (2010). It is a significant marker of their quality that a number of the plays have been repeated on various BBC Radio channels, as well as broadcast overseas. As part of the critical interrogation of my media and creative practice, excerpts of the plays have also been included in academic papers and presented at national and international conferences.

Part I of the thesis places the plays in a critical and theoretical context by outlining traditional definitions of *auteur* and *mise-en-scène* theory. It then concentrates on the cultural and political context in which the BBC operates and how this influenced the commissioning and production of the dramas. The remaining sections focus on each of the five plays detailing the narrative content and themes, stylistic approaches and how each play assists a reframing of *auteur* and *mise-en-scène* theory. The conclusion aims to redefine *auteur* and *mise-en-scène* when applied to broadcast radio production. The aim is to bring my practical radio writing experience to contribute to a new knowledge and understanding of the medium. By

combining theory and practice, I intend to offer scholarly consideration of the realities of creative radio production undertaken within an institutional context.

Part II of the thesis contains a portfolio of scripts, articles and broadcast recordings of the five original BBC Radio 4 dramas. The broadcast play details of the five key outputs examined include references to a set of related academic publications and conference papers in which critical reflection about the media and creative practice of writing the plays took place. The portfolio includes two of the related journal articles reproduced in full exploring theories of comedy performance.

Critical, and creative context

> The Medium Is The Message. (McLuhan 1964: 7)

Although the plays below deal with different narrative content, overall my writing investigates connected themes challenging traditional templates of radio drama. For example, broadcast radio drama has traditionally relied on naturalistic story-telling techniques; my radio plays attempt to explore the integration of non-naturalistic performance and production forms and techniques.

One of the key methodological concerns of my research is investigating how *auteur* theory can also be applied to radio, and also considering how the theory is reconfigured in the context of the reality of twenty-first century production protocols. My plays also present a series of questions prompted by creative binaries such as: scripted dialogue and actor improvisation; repeatable practice and non-repeatable innovation; and naturalistic character development and non-naturalistic soundscaping. My research articulates how these and other questions were constructed and addresses how traditional criticisms of medial production have tended to overlook investigation of *mise-en-scène* and *auteur* theory when applied to contemporary radio drama.

Mise-en-scène has attracted a plethora of definitions and has also been called by Brian Henderson film criticism's 'grand undefined term' (1980: 49). A commonly used definition cites the term as the expression of cinematic or stage space, a term used to describe the design aspects of a theatre or film production. This essentially means that the term refers to the entirety of pictorial screen or stage composition that communicate theme and meaning (of the narrative).

Although it originated in the theatre, when applied to television and cinema *mise-en-scène* now refers to everything that appears before the camera and its arrangement including the actors' choreography, lighting and design - set, costume and make-up. These are all aspects guided (or manipulated) by the director, and thus, in French film credits, the director's title is *metteur en scène*, 'placer on scene'. I welcome the challenge to re-frame the term *mise-en-scène* so that it can be applied to describe the holistic elements that make up radio drama production and design, a task seemingly overdue as my research yields that no specific definition currently exists. Therefore when I apply the term to radio, *mise-en- scène* will represent everything that appears before the microphone and its arrangement including the actor's choreography, audio perspective and balancing, space and location selection, sound-scaping and sound effects. It will also refer to the types of microphone selected as different recording devices yield different tonal qualities and textures. As Tim Crook identifies,

> The arrangement of sounds in plane, space, perspective, tone, hues and texture determines the quality of the image and moving picture experienced in the mind of the listener as well as what the listener is feeling emotionally. (1999: 79)

Hand-in hand with *mise-en-scène* goes *auteur* theory, which places emphasis on the director as the primary author of cinematic work. Originating as a concept from the 1950s French New Wave (*La Nouvelle Vague*), filmmakers such as François Truffaut celebrated the director as the principal, distinctive authorial voice of a film's creative vision. The concept is given legal authority in that, according to European law, the director is considered an original copyright holder and one of the 'authors' of the film. In his influential book *Signs and Meanings in the Cinema* Peter Wollen re-defined the supremacy of the director's influence, claiming that

> [t]he director does not subordinate himself to another author; his source is only a pretext, which provides catalysts, scenes which fuse with his own preoccupations to produce a radically new work. Thus the manifest process of performance, the treatment of a subject, conceals the latent production of a quite new text, the production of the director as an auteur (1972: 113).

However, *auteur theory*, while (still) a contentious concept, has become increasingly discredited in that many critics and contemporary directors recognize the collaborative nature of film (and stage) production. This has probably been due in part to advances in screen technology – for example, Computer-Generated Imagery (CGI), 3D, High Definition, motion capture techniques – which increase the status of the visual design technicians at the expense of the director. Also, at its most basic, the definition of a director's principal responsibility as the interpreter of the script, however visually poetic, has been refigured in the last 50 years.

Furthermore, the challenge to the director as primary 'author' of a film has been reinforced by award-winning screenwriters such as William Goldman in his book *Adventures in the Screen Trade: A Personal View of Hollywood and Screenwriting* (1989: 100-105). Also respected film critics such as Pauline Kael (of *New Yorker Magazine*, 1968-1991), consistently questioned the primacy of the director's vision. In her influential essay *Raising Kane* (1989) Kael challenged the authorship of Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941), by arguing for equal weight to be given to screenwriter Herman J Mankiewicz as an 'author' of the film. It is interesting to note that according to the IMDb website (2014) there are three further 'contributory writers' uncredited on the film.

Alan Schneider, film director of Samuel Beckett's only screenplay *Film* (1965) starring Buster Keaton, 'saw the screenplay as an intermediate partial object, a transparent film through which the author's creativity had to be made visible'; Schneider claimed even to be using the film medium and film production techniques purely as *translation machines* through which Beckett's authorship would pass' (Bignell 1999: 34; emphasis added). Hollywood journalist and historian Aljean Harmetz, referring to the creative input of producers and studio executives in classical Hollywood, argues in *Round Up the Usual Suspects* that *auteur* theory 'collapses against the reality of the studio system' (2002: 29).

I argue that this 'collapse' of traditional *auteur* theory is compounded when applied to the manner in which UK radio and television creative input (especially writing and directing) in the last decade has been affected by a much more intrusive and censorious broadcasting compliance system of regulation. I will return to this issue with specific reference to the production of my radio plays.

The challenges to *auteur* theory can also be viewed through a re-interpretation, or rather a new application, of the theories of New Criticism, an early 20th century school of literary criticism. The New Critics argued that critics made an 'intentional fallacy' when they tried to interpret works of art by speculating about what the author meant, based on the author's personality or life experiences. New Critics argued that information or speculation about an author's intention was secondary to the words on the page as the basis of the experience of reading literature. As W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley articulate in *The Intentional Fallacy* (1946) 'the design of the author or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of literary art' (cited in Gerstner and Staiger 2003: 11).

Taken together with Roland Barthes's (1915-1980) work signaling the death of the authorial voice, such critical positions have challenged the authority and status of the author-centric

view and could be applied as much to radio production as any other art medium. Yet, as Michel Foucault has asserted, 'it is not enough, however, to repeat the empty affirmation that the author has disappeared. […] Instead, we must locate the space left empty by the author's disappearance, follow the distribution of gaps and beaches, and watch for the openings that this disappearance uncovers' (1975: 105).

As previously stated, only rarely has *mise-en-scène, auteur* theory or re-definitions of 'the author-function' (Foucault 1975: 107) been used to describe radio. This may in part be a result of radio's relatively low profile in scholarly research. As Michele Hilmes points out in 'Rethinking Radio','[i]n the humanities, radio's cultural marginality and lowbrow roots worked against academic legitimation,… its study subsumed under the dominance of the visual' (Hilmes 2002: 6). This PhD by Published Work intends to make an original contribution to the present state of knowledge concerning radio creation and production by exploring theoretical questions that are drawing on a set of outputs from the author's own creative practice and industry experience.

These outputs have prompted and informed other creative practice and related academic conference presentations and publications. For example, I have started to adapt the radio play *Bell in the Ball* (2010) for screen and stage, posing questions not only concerning multiple adaptation but also comparing the representation of visual disability by and through each medium. Issues of racism and sexism in comedy explored in radio plays such as *Goodbye Mr Gherkin* (2007) and *A Higher Education* (2000) have prompted the presentation of papers at international conferences and publication of two peer-reviewed articles in the journal *Comedy Studies*, entitled 'Racism in comedy reappraised' (2010) and 'The roots of alternative comedy?' (2013) which are reproduced in the Part II portfolio. Full broadcast details of the five plays examined can also be found in this second section. .

There has been relatively little written about radio that explores *auteur* and *mise-en-scène* theory that traditional sociological and semiological theoretical approaches, usually applied more widely to television, stage and screen, offer a relevant starting point. However, such approaches appear not to fully consider the environmental realm in which the spectator receives information, or more relevantly here, in which the listener receives aural information. In other words, *how* the audience actually accepts and, by extension, listens to material is often excluded from theoretical analysis. In a point about television but relevant also to understanding the sometime domestic media of radio, in *Living Room Wars* Ien Ang argues that the semiological approach 'has attempted to overcome any notion of conscious institutional or commercial manipulation, on the one hand, and of free audience choice on the other' (1996: 19). Ang's contention that critical approaches to television reception appear to be 'an over-simplistic idea of communication as the transmission of transparent messages from and to fully autonomous subjects' (1996: 19) can equally be applied when considering approaches to radio criticism.

Furthermore, I argue that what governs radio writing and production aesthetics are the prevailing political and cultural contexts prevalent in the broadcast media generally and at the BBC specifically. Awareness of and response to shifts of commissioning compliance are as much part of the creative writing and production process as the author's thematic aims, yet they are absent from most definitions and analysis concerning *mise-en-scène* and *auteur* theory. Most critical approaches appear to place primary weight on the director's organisation of the elements for successful interpretation of a script, without sufficient consideration of the

multiplicity of other influencing factors. Consider for example Aston and Savona's assertion, when discussing theatrical production:

> Whilst the dramatist is the originator of the linguistic sign-system, the director nowadays has control over the theatrical (as opposed to dramatic) shape and is faced with the task of organising the signifying systems of theatre at her/his disposal…. If the director fails in this task, then the performance will not make sense to the spectator…. It is the responsibility of the director to ensure that the sign-systems operating in a production not only work in isolation but also create the desired effect when combined with signs from other systems. (2002: 100)

This description of directorial organisation on stage may be true superficially although I will attempt to show later how the radio producer/director certainly influences the 'dramatic shape' of any script. The more critical question that arises is how much creative control any director, writer or performer can exert on a radio production process, which by its very nature is collaborative and at the same time subject to rigid broadcast protocols.

The BBC, and the radio environment

It might seem self-evident to conclude that 'factors other than textual ones play a part in the way viewers [and listeners] make sense of text' (1996: 20), but when considering the service licence remit of BBC Radio 4 and the specific demographic and cultural preferences of a typical Radio 4 audience, these factors become an important issue when considering radio drama commissioning policy, the scripting, the encoding and the de-coding of the broadcast text. The wider macro-political context surrounding licence fee funding is also relevant in shaping the cultural emphasis of commissioned product in that the BBC increasingly feels the need to justify relevance through audience reach, satisfaction and ratings. Arguably, a defensive stance is taken by the BBC to counter political attempts to introduce advertising or subscription charges by abolishing the licence fee that their opponents see as an exploitative and compulsory public tax.

BBC commissioning guidelines re-emphasise the public service remit: the Radio 4 'service should appeal to listeners seeking intelligent programmes in many genres which inform, educate and entertain' (BBC commissioning, 2014). RAJAR (Radio Joint Audience Research) statistics confirm that the typical Radio 4 audience corresponds to an ABC1 demographic profile of higher status and older listeners who are typically aged over 55. This group represents over half of its audience of around 11.2 million listeners a week (RAJAR 2014). On average, a Radio 4 listener aged over 55 will hear approximately 15 hours of Radio 4 programming each week compared with 7 hours for a listener aged between 25 and 34 (BBC Trust 2011, 54). The recommendations from BBC management as detailed in the 2011 Service Review to seek a younger more diverse audience were significant in attempting to change, extend and diversify the listening demographic:

> there is scope to improve performance in the north of England where Radio 4 reach is low, despite the low reach of other BBC local radio services. They have set out a number of specific initiatives to address the disparity of listening between the north and south of England including: *being clearer and more consistent about the origin of non-London productions in promotions and continuity announcements* (BBC Trust 2011, 56-57).

Also the BBC management set out a number of initiatives to close this listening gap of black and minority ethnic group listeners including,

> promoting the station among minority ethnic opinion formers through special content and marketing events;…raising the number of minority ethnic drama writers and highlighting their contribution in our promotions and marketing; improving the promotion of productions and talent that diversify the sound of Radio 4 (BBC Trust 2011: 55).

Such policy shifts would certainly attempt to have an impact on drama commissioning. It is probable that proposed material corresponding to these new BBC management audience strategy initiatives following the 2011 review would have more likelihood of being commissioned. However, the BBC Trust is keen also not to alienate its core over-55 year old audience. Therefore, subject matter not deemed of interest to this demographic is also unlikely to be commissioned by editors and producers. Material that is commissioned will need to be written in a way that can appeal to this 'older, wiser' demographic. I will argue that these seemingly extraneous macro-elements influence both the authorial voice and the *mise-en-scène* of the drama at a micro-level. Consequently these elements need to be considered as part of a non-traditional reframing of *mise-en-scène* and *auteur* theory.

Furthermore, the 'familial and domestic conditions' (Ang 1996: 19) in which we listen to the radio cannot be over-emphasized. Much radio is listened to haphazardly, usually alone, often in a vehicle on the move in comparison to television, cinema and stage where spectators more often select a particular programme and choose to concentrate their viewing (notwithstanding recent developments in multimedia digital consumption with personal devices - watching television while playing on the iPad, for instance). And, as Aston and Savona observe, '[v]ariations in the proxemic relation between the actor and the spectator can radically alter the spectator's perception and reception of a production' (2002: 115) - a point which can equally be applied to the relationship between radio performer and listener.

These kinds of environmental factors necessarily influence the writing, design and reception of audio drama. This is exemplified by advice often provided by radio commissioners and producers who urge young writers to create Impact in the opening minutes of the drama with an 'ear-grabbing' Inciting Incident in order to maximize attention span. As the New Writing North website puts it:

> Have a good opening - get the listener hooked immediately. The average turn-off time for people listening to radio drama is two minutes, so there is no time for vague openings in plays. Have impact with your opening pages of script, cut into the story quickly and make use of music and sound. Make sure your opening is working hard enough for you (2014).

Although openings depend on the type of slot, single one-off drama for the BBC Afternoon Play (weekdays 1.15-2.00pm) tends to follow this template. Potentially, it is a formulaic device that cements a house style which could restrict writers' and directors' artistic freedom to experiment, or at the very least, creates an aesthetic barrier difficult to vary.

In addition, radio audiences do not have the same historical, cultural or emotional relationship to the material that television or cinema spectators experience. Although radio was invented around 1906, almost 20 years after the motion picture but over 20 years before television, the visual image has become the primary medial form in shaping western cultural

norms. Although radio 'occupies a significant position in the cultural lives of societies throughout the globe' (Crook 1999: 3), I argue that the influence and relevance of UK radio in many aspects, including academic interest, has diminished accordingly.

> Very few academic, contemporary, radio audience studies exist, compared to masses of research and theorising around television audiencehood….By omission, radio appears to be conceived of as an 'old' technology, with a diminishing and unimportant role in contemporary life, especially as compared with newer technologies.... Radio's early days, in the 1920's, 1930's and 1940's, are often depicted popularly as the 'golden days' of the medium - before television was introduced to the British public, and radio became lost in the background of domestic leisure. (Tacci 1997)

Although there is a profusion of pop music stations and an expansion in local provision globally, the proliferation of radio and the increased opportunities to access on-line has paradoxically reduced its power to shape opinion as its struggles for space in an age of competing medial forms and platforms. The influence of UK radio, and especially radio drama, to shock, influence or even to create a national conversation is rare.

> [W]e do not wonder in awe at this medium any more - why should we when it is simply there in the background, almost all the time? And we don't read or hear about the radio medium very much either - it rarely makes the front pages, rarely arouses the same sort of heated debates over say, violence, or sex or sensationalism, that television seems to engender…. in the media pond it is still an economic minnow, and in society as a whole it is largely ignored. (Hendy 2000: 3)

The semiotic screen signifiers and expected shooting and editing protocols of genre and signature *auteur* television and film directors are consumed and internalized from an early age by audiences. The spectator is accustomed to these conventions and needs little guidance in how to read the visual narrative. It should be acknowledged too that, even for the most dedicated radio-phile, a commitment to listen for almost an hour in a concentrated way takes discipline and focus. This may further explain why in the UK, listening to speech-only drama appears to be an acquired taste of the over 55-year old ABC1 demographic where the ear needs to be trained in concentration and application.

Unlike film and television, there is not a widely-recognised back-catalogue of radio drama conventions and sign-signifiers to which the young or inexperienced listener subconsciously refers. With the possible exception of Orson Welles' *War of the Worlds* from 1938, there are very few radio drama production titles that could be quoted by the general public or even by regular radio listeners. Furthermore, this absence of familiarity is mirrored by neglect to evaluate radio comprehensibly and reliably by theorists and academics. As Tim Crook puts it:

> [r]adio drama has been one of the most unappreciated and understated literary forms of the twentieth century.... Even now, radio drama is regarded as an adjunct of radio production practice…. [This is] a case of underdeveloped radio theory and a continuing struggle to legitimise sound art or radio drama in terms of its equality as an art form. (1999: 3-4)

This lack of identifiable historical referencing gives radio drama a lack of cultural gravitas, a second-class status even amongst some of its own writers, producers and audience. It also makes the listener's task more difficult in connecting with the drama material as the cultural back-catalogue of radio signifiers is largely unknown or at least innately unfamiliar.

However, radio drama also provides artistic freedoms from the straight-jackets of much hackneyed film and television-style conventions with their current pre-occupations of over-realistic dialogue and unrealistic budgets. For example, on radio, you can locate 10,000 extras played by only one character (over dubbed and double tracked) on the moon at no great expense. The special aesthetic experience radio offers is that, given an absorbing play, the audience is stimulated to create its own mind pictures – a liberating experience that many have argued, is comparable only to the intimacy of reading a novel.

Andrew Criswell who defines radio as a 'blind medium' explores the distinctiveness that the medium can offer an audience:

> [I] want first to stress that blindness is also the source of some real advantages which it (radio) possesses over other media. The most famous of these is, of course, its appeal to the imagination. Because it offers sound-only instead of sound and vision the listener is compelled to 'supply' the visual data for himself. The details are described, or they may suggest themselves through sound, but they are not 'pictured' for him, he must picture them for himself - and he may, indeed, use them as a basis for picturing further details which are not described. Moreover as we all know, the scope of the imagination is virtually limitless: we may picture not only lifelike objects but the fantastical, impossible scenes of an experimental play. (1994: 7)

However, the definition of radio as a 'blind medium' has been challenged by some critics and I will return to this debate in the context of my play *Bell in the Ball.*

Nevertheless, it is generally accepted that with the absence of visual stimuli and an accessible referencing culture, the radio writer and producer need to work hard to stimulate interest and retain the attention of the listener. The visual absences also have a bearing on the aesthetic texture and shape of the drama both at the writing and production stages and consequently affect the *mise-en-scène*. For example, to assist an audience unfamiliar with aural-only identification of sound, characters, locations and effects often need to be (over-) explained in the dialogue. Citing Hilda Matheson's analysis of radio drama in her book *Broadcasting* (1933), Crook describes the precision that writers, directors and technicians need to consider:

> She (Matheson) recognised that sound plays needed as much precise 'blocking' in the sound stage before the microphones as any stage play. Principal characters needed to stand out clearly from their background. Overwrought and emphasised realism confuses the story and distracts the focus of the ear. It is astonishing that these basic mistakes are a common feature of contemporary BBC radio drama production. (1999: 75)

It is because influencing external factors that have a direct affect on the radio audience environment have been omitted from theoretical methodologies and traditional definitions of *mise-en-scène* and *auteur* theory that this thesis aims to re-frame the terms when applied to radio. For Joseph Gelmis, 'the concept of *mise-en-scène* was developed by theorists interested in issues of authorship, in the role of participants, and particularly directors in constructing the meaning of film' (1970: 94); this resulted in film directors having increasing control over the *mise-en-scène*. This control could equally apply to radio if were not for the fact that writers and directors have a diminishing influence over their work. Radio, like most contemporary media production processes, has by its very nature become an increasingly collaborative process that is now recognized and celebrated as such. At the same time radio has been subject to an extended and more rigidly enforced set of external and macro-

broadcast protocols that have reduced the power of the signature *auteur* writer and director and who by extension have a consequently diminished control over the *mise-en-scène*. This diminution of control is at its most evident when investigating the contemporary radio commissioning process and compliance regulations, and it is to these that we now turn.

Commissioning, compliance and theory in BBC radio

It should be noted that apart from the BBC, aiming to comply with its Public Service Broadcasting remit, no other UK radio broadcaster commissions original drama production on such a large scale. According to 2011 statistics the BBC produced over 600 hours of drama in the Radio 4 schedule 'in this area of excellence' (BBC Trust 2011: 66) every year. As part of BBC initiatives to open up competition in response to political pressures to stimulate a more open market, Radio 4 commissioned around 14 per cent of its hours from independent suppliers, exceeding its 10 per cent target for 2009-10 (Source: RAJAR 2009-10). Critically the implementation of what the BBC Trust called a 'Window of Creative Competition' was open to independents and in-house producers, in addition to the 10 per cent guarantee for independents.

The Service Review stated that

> [t]he variety of topics covered and the different format of dramas in slots such as the Afternoon Play are considered assets to Radio 4. However, we agree with BBC management that this wide range can make it difficult to achieve impact (2011: 66).

Because of such 'difficulty' identified, it is unsurprising then that the changing practice and customs of BBC cultural activity have been assimilated into radio commissioning and production. This assimilation has had a significant effect on the *mise-en-scène* and authorial voice of radio drama at the commissioning, the writing and production stages.

A telling conclusion to the 2011 Service Review followed a meeting of 'stakeholder meeting of writers, directors and producers':

> Overall they believed that the range and balance of drama broadcast on Radio 4 played an important role to in the cultural life of the UK…. [They] understood the value of making sure that subject matter was relevant, but felt that a wider range of topics should be maintained. They also felt that there was a small risk that Radio 4 drama could end up sounding more similar due to the homogenisation of the radio drama production process… Although these remain relatively minor concerns, we expect Radio 4 to maintain a wide variety in terms of subject matter, formats and the tone of its drama (BBC Trust 2011: 66-67).

Despite the aspiration to provide 'variety', the charge of 'homogenisation' is certainly a consistent criticism of much of Radio 4's drama output and is a result of a complexity of factors that start with the commissioning process. This process has changed significantly, even in the fourteen years that I have written plays for the BBC, but has resulted in a greater centralisation of creative control both for television and radio. Despite the move of some individual departments to MediaCity at Salford in 2011, including Radio 5 Live, religion and children's programming, the commissioning decision-making power remains primarily in London.

In 1991 Deputy Director-general John Birt brought an internal market system into the BBC, named 'Producer Choice'. Under the dual guise of meeting the challenges of the new digital convergence technology *and* offering programme makers freedom to make creative choices about their programmes, the strategy was seen by commentators as a way of countering political criticism of the BBC's spiralling costs by introducing a more rigid market trading system. As Needham and Dransfield summarise, Birt's key structural changes included

> Streamlining the operation to focus on aims and objectives, policy and performance…The separation of programme production from commissioning and scheduling in television and radio, and the buying in of programmes from a range of sources. The creation of separate resources, engineering and service departments to run the production side of the BBC. (1994: 187)

The BBC had to be seen to be leaner and fit for purpose. Producers were now made aware of the true costs of their programmes by a system of buying services from in-house departments or outside suppliers and charging back for central services that the BBC used to provide at no cost. The idea was to challenge producers to find cheaper ways to make programmes, freeing up millions of pounds that, in theory, could then be ploughed back into programmes. However, as Harris and Wegg-Prosser deduce, the result of Producer Choice, if not its stated intention, was 'the recentralization of programme strategy and an end to the practice of devolving the process of programme commissioning' (2009: 236). This was the start of the 'New BBC' with the introduction of the 'offers system' whereby senior management developed 'a two-year "planning cycle"' which 'sought to fill schedules by means of continuous production lines (known as "programming strands") whose costs could be predicted and controlled' (2009: 236).

The result of these radical changes was to reign in creative excess, as the management saw it, to the shackles of centralized financial planning, control and market research. In Georgina Born's view,

> Henceforth, responsibility for commissions lay solely with the controllers, marketing executives and corporate strategists. The result was a less distributed and devolved structure of decision making with little space for the particular expertise of genre production … to flow up the hierarchy and be nurtured through dialogue. (2004: 307)

For Harris and Wegg-Prosser, the BBC was now redesigned as a broadcaster rather than a programme maker, 'where senior managers are strategists and the commissioning cycle fits the money available to the demands of the audience as perceived by marketeers and schedulers. Programme controllers abandoned their former role as creative arbiters' (2009: 232-237). As Born concludes

> Drama was particularly damaged.… The doctrine of 'value for money' can bully producers' imaginations into submission and conformity. Birt's BBC, with its new managerial credos undermined the only values that are essential to the BBC, those specific to its core activities: making programmes and running networks. Birtist management knew precisely the price of everything and the value of nothing. (2005: 372)

The historical context above is important in informing present practice as the legacy of 'Producer Choice' lives on – even though it was notionally abandoned as a named strategy by subsequent BBC Director Generals Greg Dyke and Mark Thompson. Their attempts to refine and manage this change of top-down control was marked in the Blair administrative years

with recurrent initiatives to provide 'periods of creative autonomy' with '"surges" of managerial control' (Harris and Wegg-Prosser 2009: 241).

Concerns surrounding the new centralized commissioning process continued, as evidenced by Gareth McLean's 2008 *Guardian* article entitled 'Is drama safe at the BBC?'. McLean quotes an anonymous BAFTA-award winning writer: 'There are so many cooks involved in any new project now that any distinctiveness is being throttled.… Such is the lack of courage of commissioners and the climate of fear in which they operate, the commissioning process is ossifying' (2008).

The abolition in 2010 from BBC radio schedules of the *Friday Play*, which dealt with riskier subject matter, was seen as further evidence of the thin end of the wedge and possibly even the beginning of the end for radio drama. As Leo Benedictus reported in the *Guardian* that year, Equity (the actors' union) carried two unanimous motions at their annual conference which declared that radio drama was 'rapidly becoming an endangered species' (2010). It is significant in the light of the concern expressed over what was viewed as increasingly homogenised output that Mark Damazer, the Controller of Radio 4 at the time, with responsibility for decommissioning the strand, felt the need to stress rather defensively, 'We will continue to commission challenging scripts that examine difficult and contemporary realities' (2010). It could be argued that the commitment to commission experimental and challenging new work exists solely on Radio 3 with programme strands such as *The Wire*.

The strategy outlined above to establish a central BBC commissioning process where only a single executive figure (presently the Commissioning Editor for Drama) authorizes production from a long-list of suggestions from regional producers, pre-dates my first play *A Higher Education* (2000). Although this process has been streamlined over the years (for example, comedy and drama commissioning are now separate), it is evident that however open and eclectic the viewpoint, the Commissioning Editor for Drama's sole authorising role to authorise production will necessarily shape output according to subjective taste and their interpretation of the Corporation's priority strategies as outlined above.

It is therefore important as context to summarise the detail of the present commissioning and production processes employed by the BBC. This serves as a template to investigate protocols accepted as normal professional radio practice and those that appear to lie outside the norm and challenge or re-frame conventional systems. It is a methodology that will help serve exploration of those elements that could aid new approaches to re-defining *auteur* theory.

Usually, new writers are encouraged to submit ideas, outlines or sample scenes to their regional BBC drama centre. They are also encouraged to enter a number of targeted 'New Writing' initiatives promoted on the BBC's access website such as The Writer's Room. These initiatives are developed to target particular voices and promote sections of the audience identified in the Review above as not being adequately represented on radio (and television), such as the Northern Voice or Black and Ethnic Minorities. My first commission *A Higher Education* (2000) was as a result of entering the *Alfred Bradbury Bursary* competition which the Corporation runs to encourage new writing from new voices. The script was considered to possess enough potential to be placed with a sympathetic reader and then producer for development.

From experience, I have found that the key to having ideas considered and developed is by establishing personal creative relationships with appropriate producer/directors at a local

level. Producer/directors are encouraged to nurture new talent, especially from the priority groups highlighted above, and it is to their credit that much of their time and effort is spent advising, shaping and revising raw material. Normally, a submitted idea needs to be summarised with a short synopsis detailing genre and plot. The narrative is then presented as a longer outline and then if considered viable (subject to regional/slot quota and creative potential) the author will be asked to delineate a scene-by-scene breakdown which, is then pitched by the assigned producer to the Commissioning Editor for Drama. The total budget for each script idea is a crucial factor in deciding the viability of the project; for radio drama the 2014-15 guide price for the 45-minute Afternoon Play is £18,000 (BBC Drama Commissioning Round 2014). Therefore, a drama submission will necessarily be governed by the in-house costed expenditure headings such as production and technical team, studio space, and edit time. Crucially, after the writer's fee, usually the most expensive item of expenditure is the number of actors proposed. For a one-off single drama, usually no more than six actors are considered viable, depending on the other productions already been commissioned and the total spend allocated per slot and region. If finally commissioned, the writer is expected to submit six to ten drafts (for an Afternoon Play slot) to the assigned producer/director who edits and shapes the script in consultation with the writer.

It is evident that these systematic, even mechanistic, commissioning processes and budgetary constraints have a direct influence on the creative output of the script. In other words, before a word is recorded, the author's voice and what I call the pre-*mise-en-scène* is shaped by the BBC's internal (regional), external (national) protocols and its wider corporate strategies.

All programmes need to comply with the BBC Editorial Guidelines (2014) on health, safety, taste and decency. Under heading number five, Harm and Offence, sub-headings delineate the areas that require producers and writers to be especially aware, such as use of references to Drug-taking, Nudity, Sex, Alcohol, Smoking, Suicide, Hypnotism, Exorcism, the Occult, the Paranormal, Intimidation and Humiliation etc. Under the Language sub-heading (5.4.21), the guidelines state:

> The quality of challenging material, which includes strong language, is a significant factor in determining its acceptability or unacceptability to audiences. Strong language can be acceptable when authentic or used for clear purpose or effect within a programme, but audiences dislike careless use which has no editorial purpose. We must not include the strongest language before the watershed, or on radio when children are particularly likely to be in our audience, or in online content likely to appeal to a significant proportion of children. We must also make careful judgements about the use of the strongest language post-watershed and ensure it is clearly signposted. *Any proposal to use the strongest language (cunt, motherfucker and fuck or its derivatives) must be referred to and approved by the relevant output controller, who should consider the editorial justification.* Chief Adviser Editorial Policy may also be consulted (BBC Editorial Guidelines 2014; emphasis original).

It could be argued that these are reasonable constraints to prevent reckless, insensitive or offensive creative writing. However, the paradox faced by many programme makers and writers is that the audience for a Radio 4 afternoon drama slot mainly comprised of an older demographic, may wish or even expect to be challenged by contemporary drama including the inclusion of realistic or earthy language from fictional characters. It adds weight to criticisms from the stakeholder group that Radio 4 drama needs to guard against the danger of sounding homogenised and safe.

An important contributory factor that enormously affected compliance regulations was the aftermath of the Ross/Brand affair in October 2008. This was when Jonathan Ross and Russell Brand defamed actor Andrew Sachs and his niece in a lewd, salacious live Radio 2 programme, *The Russell Brand Show*. The subsequent investigation identified a lack of editorial/producer control and concluded that the guidelines on what could and could not be aired were tightened, to be evidenced by a much more rigorous checklist of the proposed content of every programme to be completed by individual programme producers. As The Service Review confirms:

> We note, however, that, since the high profile breach during The Russell Brand Show on Radio 2 in October 2008, the BBC has reviewed and strengthened its audio and music compliance procedures. (BBC Service Review 2011: 64)

The impact of both a centralised commissioning process and strengthened editorial guidelines may at first sight not to play a crucial part in the authorial voice or *mise-en-scène*. However, I would argue that both pre-determine the style and content of the original drama presented for production. Furthermore, the compliance regulations have a direct impact on the author's use, or non-use, of subject matter and dialogue.

Examples of executive overview can be drawn from the production of *Bell in the Ball* (2010). 'Bollocks' was not allowed to be uttered within the first fifteen minutes of the play and its use, including substitutes like 'nuts' were limited thereafter. Only one 'bollock' per scene was allowed although strangely 'arse' remained after the edit. Interestingly, the word 'shag' was cut during recording, it being replaced, inexplicably, by 'jump', even though ten years earlier in *A Higher Education* (2000) the use of 'shag' had been permitted. Perhaps this later judgement was a symptom of corporate caution following the Ross/Brand affair or an indication of a particular executive editor's interpretation of compliance.

These changes had a direct, if relatively minor, effect on the rhythms of the speeches concerned. The authorial voice, although admittedly not drastically impaired, was certainly manipulated by executive protocol. However, as I will describe below, the script of *A Higher Education* was changed drastically by the inventions of the actors to great comic effect. This manipulation was positive and consensually encouraged whereas the interventions on *Bell in the Ball* felt imposed and uncomfortable. Such manipulations of scripts are different sides of the same coin and exemplify how traditional *auteur* theory needs re-framing to include authorship other than solely the writer's voice.

Wayne Booth argues that 'the author, speaking in a variety of different voices always betrays his presence shaping the narrative for an implied reader' (1961: 1-2). I would argue that this traditional definition of *auteur* theory should, to accurately reflect the supervision and oversight of any national broadcaster, be reframed to include the different voices of producer, editor, output controller and BBC Trust who also 'shape the narrative' by 'betraying' their collective presence. As Foucault accurately identifies, what is of equal significance to the meaning of the text composed are the social and cultural contexts in which an author operates:

> An anonymous text posted on a wall probably has a writer – but not an author. The author function is therefore characteristic of the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within a society. (1969: 108)

Practice: collaboration, chemistry and theory in *A Higher Education*

In the following sections I now to turn to discussing the practical elements of radio writing and production, specifically in the context of my research questions concerning *auteur* and *mise-en-scène*. In the light of the cultural and political perspectives outlined above, it is important to detail the contextual genesis that led to the production of my first radio play *A Higher Education* (Peters 2000) when considering *auteur theory.* There were two key drivers that encouraged its writing and production: firstly, as indicated above, the BBC playwriting competition, *The Alfred Bradley Bursary*, and secondly, the historical relationship I have with the leading comedy performer Rik Mayall for whom the lead part of Don Crookfield was principally written.

As founder members of the alternative theatre comedy 20th Century Coyote during our BA Drama studies at Manchester University (1975-78), Mayall and I not only established a close friendship but more relevantly, a special performing and writing bond which determined the style and content of *A Higher Education*. Coyote produced seven original comedies principally performed at The Band on the Wall venue in Manchester from 1977 to 1978, some years before the alternative comedy boom of the eighties. Mayall and Adrian Edmondson – another member of the Coyote troupe – went on to have great success in the 1980s and 1990s as a double act, The Dangerous Brothers, and then as creators of *The Young Ones* (BBC2 1982-84) situation-comedy, which formalized the knockabout, irreverent physicalisation first developed by 20th Century Coyote.

However, for the purposes of investigating new approaches to *auteur theory* the Coyote story is relevant because the unspoken, un-credited author of *A Higher Education* – both stylistically and structurally – is the Coyote company. It is important to note that all the Coyote shows developed through a process of improvisation and re-improvisation – there were no final performance scripts, just templates and scene-by-scene skeleton outlines. This unformulated structure appears to be a contradiction yet it provided the basis of the 'anything can happen' performing environment which audiences, more used to seeing conventional well-made plays, enthusiastically embraced in the late 1970s. This is not surprising as the plays were staged at a time when non-conformist punk aesthetics were becoming the norm. *A Higher Education* is a direct descendent of the historical legacy of three years of honing and developing comedy devising and performing techniques with the Coyote company. I have explored the working practices and achievements of Coyote in my article 'The roots of alternative comedy? The alternative story of 20th Century Coyote and Eighties Comedy':

> What was unusual at the time about *20th Century Coyote* is that it combined … the surreal, the absurd, bawdy Restoration farce, fractured TV sit-com with long-form theatre improvisation.… The *Coyote* shows were amalgams of all these forms – often improvised round embryonic plots and recognized character personas, but usually, with an absurd twist. The 'genre' was closest to farce and slapstick – unsurprising when Peters and Mayall were both enthusiastic advocates of Laurel and Hardy.... If things went wrong, this was seen as strength not weakness.… Crucial to the success of the group was that the members of *Coyote* possessed complimentary and at the same time antagonistic performance styles that helped develop and cement stock comedy personas and which in turn suggested narrative. (Peters 2013, 12)

A Higher Education incorporates these multi-genre comic forms to present a grotesque satire of a dysfunctional and cash-strapped university Drama Department staffed by heightened character types attempting to deal with a missing student, apparently held hostage by a

crazed, gun-wielding, politically-motivated maverick lecturer named Roy Pointer (Philip Glenister). The egotistical and amoral Head of Department Don Crookfield (Mayall) suspects that his action might be a protest against the budget cuts. Senior Lecturer Sophie Sexton (Helen Lederer) knows Pointer's true motivation as she is secretly complicit in his action. The siege ends with staff, parents and police invited to an unorthodox avant-garde production of *Hamlet* in the studio - the 'show to end all shows' - as a vengeful ruse to embarrass Deidre Dean, the Dean (Judi Earl), who wishes to close the department but is finally arrested for wasting police time.

A Higher Education developed the stylistic techniques developed by the Coyote troupe combining heightened character personas with a farcical, pantomimic performance style. Its commission was the first opportunity that allowed me to present my particular writing voice (my *auteur* signature), combining naturalistic story-telling techniques based on a conventional three-act structure but with the integration of non-naturalistic acting and production techniques. The exaggerated performances establish a hyper-real, cartoon-like melodramatic aesthetic playing to the strengths of experienced comedy performers like Mayall, Lederer and Glenister. Also, echoing the Coyote shows of the past, and very unusually for radio drama, some lines were improvised 'live' when recorded. Indeed there was so much added improvised material overall that entire scenes needed to be cut in the edit in order to fit the play to time, a fact which in itself invites us to question whose story is it anyway?

Examples of the process of collaborative addition and subtraction can be evidenced below by comparing the original final recording script of the opening scene with the transcript of the actual broadcast performance. The improvised additions are indicated by ***italics underlined*** and the lines removed indicated by **CUT:**

SCENE 1: DON'S OFFICE

(DIALOGUE OVERLAPS WHERE INDICATED : …….)

FX: DOOR KNOCKS. DOOR OPENS.

DON: Ah! Come in Sophie. Great to see you.

SOPHIE: Don, I thought I'd better let you …. (know)

DON: It's been far too long, you…. (know)

SOPHIE: …know what's happening. As Head of Department, I think you need to…(know)

DON: Don't ***you*** be a stranger just 'cos I've moved round the corner. You know I rely on you to bring me up to date with the Drama Department gossip. Coffee?

SOPHIE: Thanks. Look Don I need…

DON: Powder?

SOPHIE: What?

DON: Powdered milk? No fresh I'm afraid. The fridge is knackered.

SOPHIE: Black'll do….

DON: [POURING COFFEE] Kids fine?

SOPHIE: Fine, fine. Martha plays rugby for the Colts now and Harry's started ballet and tap. How's George?

DON: Oh ***George George,*** she's just the same – head always in the clouds. Paragliding, ***paragliding, paragliding, Saturday Wednesdays and twice on Fridays*** [**CUT by actor**: every Saturday]. So, what can I do for you?

SOPHIE: Well, it's rather…(serious)

DON: 'Cos if you're adding to the part-time budget, forget it. University finances won't give the Drama Department a penny more. The Dean ***dubbed*** [**CUT by actor:** named] us the "Tragi-Comedy Department" after our last over-spend.

SOPHIE: No Don, it's more…

DON: 83 grand and that('s) ***is*** it. Full timers will have to teach…(more)

SOPHIE: More…

DON: …more this Semester. And I'm aware that the strain is beginning to tell. Not replacing Tony is…

SOPHIE: …impossible…

DON: …difficult for staff to assimilate. But twelve and a half hours a week coal-face contact teaching isn't…

SOPHIE: Teaching isn't…(the main point)

DON: …a major hardship. O.K., so it isn't simply the teaching. It's the admin, ***HmmHmm,*** the preparation, the…

SOPHIE: …shows to assess at…(night)

DON: …night-time work, I know. But that should be a pleasure. O.K…

SOPHIE: …most times… (it's a pain)

DON: …sometimes it's a pain. ***Mmmmm.*** But look at the MACBETH Roy Pointer directed last Semester. It was…

SOPHIE: Flawed.

DON: …astonishingly good. Nice twist to set Dunsinane in the American Wild West as a metaphor for decadent capitalistic power. ***Hahhaha, Oh*** That's ***old*** Roy at his unreconstructed, Marxist best.

SOPHIE: [IMPATIENT] Don! (**DON:*Um?***) There's a problem. (**DON: *Oh***) A problem with Roy as it happens. He's been teaching Advanced Characterisation to the third year's today and…

DON: ***Oh*** Don't tell me – the Method Acting experiment again. Hell's teeth!
[CUT IN EDIT: Remember that ex-student Kirsty Johnson. Went into the train station ticket office and demanded cash with menaces. Convinced she was Ronnie Biggs. She could have got 10 years. Or a one-way ticket to Rio.**]**

SOPHIE: No it's stranger than that. Roy's in the Studio now.

DON: And?

SOPHIE: The class has finished.

DON: So?

SOPHIE: And he says…

DON: Yes?

SOPHIE: He's not coming out.

Scene End.

The inclusion of ellipses, which I use consistently in all my scripts, indicate unfinished emotional expression and is a legacy of the Coyote scene-by-scene scenarios providing space for interruption and improvisation as the actor sees fit. The technique may also be explained as a subconscious homage to the pauses of Harold Pinter and Samuel Beckett whom were significant influences when introduced as part of the Manchester University drama course all the Coyote troupe attended.

The improvised interjections by Rik Mayall such as 'Mmmm' and the insertions of hysterical laughter certainly gave the play energy and impact from Scene 1 – vital ingredients to capture a radio audience, as we have seen. More than that, Mayall (as most modern actors do post-Method) brought the character to himself and gave Crookfield (formerly Cruikshank in final draft script) a host of manic and disturbing personality traits perfectly in keeping with the melodramatic style I had intended and discussed with Mayall prior to recording. Indeed, as I had written the part with him in mind, the script was similar to a 20th Century Coyote template with which to experiment and manipulate. Other takes of the scene above demonstrate the 'anything can happen' Coyote ethos as Mayall never delivered the script in the same way twice as he cut and included other improvised dialogue. It is a clear example of a well-honed comedic technique delivering non-repeatable innovative performance.

It is what enlightened writers call 'added value for the benefit of the play', and what unenlightened *auteur* writers may describe colloquially as 'They're messing with my script'. It is worth mentioning that the producer/director Polly Thomas deserves much credit for allowing this degree of creative freedom and experiment, which was and is again rare in traditional radio production.

Laura Mulvey, exploring Hollywood film director Douglas Sirk's signature *mise-en-scène* proposes that melodrama as a genre was not only identified across cinematic values such as lights, sound, editing and framing objects, 'but crucially the meaning they (the cinematic

values; my addition) carry when the intensity of emotion rendered characters' feelings or situation "unspeakable"' (2005: 231).

Mulvey adds that the melodramatic *mise-en-scène* also

> acts as means of narrative, contributing a kind of cinematic commentary or description, inscribing into the scene significance that goes beyond the consciousness of characters. This is almost like an extra-diegetic mode of address, reaching out to the spectator who is prepared to find meaning through cinematic style.… [R]ather than a displaced expression of the unspeakable, meanings are encapsulated, materialised and mapped onto the image through the signifying potential of the cinema itself. (231)

This observation can be usefully applied to the radio sphere and the *mise-en-scène* fusion of selecting specific recording space (for example an acoustically dry 'dead room' to suggest Crookfield's office for the scene above), the placement of microphones and the variable audio perspectives choreographed by director and technicians. Mulvey's point is also useful in describing the intensity of the absence of dialogue, the space to say the 'unspeakable' indicating a similar 'intensity of emotion', an especially powerful tool in speech-only radio. Such a technique is present, I suggest, in *A Higher Education*. Also, the passion, energy and volume of the heightened performances in the play resulted in disparities of sound balance technically and, by extension, an emotional imbalance. Critically, this further added to the textual *mise-en-scène* of chaos and confusion, a theme at the heart of the play, and created beyond the scripted page an aesthetic within the listener's imagination.

To state that we are a product of our influences is a truism - it is accepted that any work of art has multiple creative sources and identifiable influences. However, there are new conclusions to draw in the context of exploring *auteur* theory as applied to radio production. This is not solely a question of collaboration and collective invention that undermines the traditional *auteur* theory of a sole or principal artistic creator. In *A Higher Education*, not only were the director and actors paramount in suggesting, including and excluding original material; not only was the historic chemistry of writer and lead actor to create the aesthetic space for an unusual heightened performing style critical to the production; nor was it solely the influences of macro-BBC cultural environment and protocols detailed above; it was all these factors taken together that created a textured aural *mise-en-scène* never imagined when my apparently authored final draft was presented to the producer/director.

In their taxonomy of identifiable categories of collaborative practice, Brien and Brady state that

> collaboration is neither a tidy nor a static form of creative practice. Fluidity is the key.… [A]uthors can move in and out of collaborative forms at various stages in the same project, particularly as aspects of the situation change. (2004)

They define one category, *contribution collaboration*, as occurring when

> several artists contribute to a project in their separate ways, each maintaining their own signature, but producing a unified object, or achieving a common goal. This form of collaboration is found in films and in theatre performances where set designers, writers, actors, directors, lighting technicians and the like all work together to produce a single product.… The key factor here is that each of the collaborators is given authorial status, no matter how slight their input into the project. (2004)

However, as I was the only credited author of *A Higher Education* this seems to reinforce the need for new definitions of authorship. The chemistry of collaboration was evidently effective as the play received unanimously favourable reviews and 'Radio Choice' notices from a wide spectrum of cultural and political opinion (see Part II Broadcast Play Details). For example, *The Daily Express* commented that the 'comedy is rip-roaring, lightning-paced, over the top satirical fun' (2000). The play was also nominated for the Richard Imison Best First Play Award which is rare for a comedy submission.

Non-naturalism and *mise-en-scène* in Brain of Brighouse

With the commission of *Brain of Brighouse* (Peters, 2005) my intention was to explore aural devices designed to compliment and enhance the challenging subject matter and which required the integration of naturalistic character development with non-naturalistic soundscaping. The play was devised as a much darker comedy-drama than *A Higher Education* as I attempted to explore difficult issues of abandonment, domestic violence, deception, divorce and parental suicide all through the comedic device of a young boy who has the gift for memorizing trivia. The challenging subject matter therefore, demanded the texture that only a fractured, discomforting, non-naturalistic *mise-en-scène* could provide.

Presented through unreliable first-person narrative the drama involves a general knowledge prodigy from Brighouse, Danny Crossley. The play traces Danny's painful journey of self-discovery as he attempts to satisfy his obsession - to learn the identity of his father who disappeared years earlier. His mother Joyce wants to protect her only child, but is persuaded by manipulative Uncle Vince that there is a fortune to be made from Danny's gift of memory. Vince enters Danny for the popular TV show *Beat the Clock* to win £10,000 prize money. The show is presented by Mike Coster whose voice and catch phrase 'Take the dough - time's the foe' continually haunt Danny. The denouement (Scene 23 below) is set in the final of the *Beat the Clock* studio where one musical question triggers a painful suppressed memory.

SC 23: INT. TV STUDIO - MATCH

DANNY: [NARR. ASIDE] I was shifting into cruise-control…

MIKE: An otter's young….?

FX: BUZZER

DANNY: Whelp.

MIKE: Correct.

DANNY: [NARR. ASIDE] …Forcing the other contestants into…

MIKE: brown seaweed….?

FX: BUZZER

GIRL CONTESTANT: Bladderwort

FX: ERROR KLAXON

DANNY: [NARR. ASIDE] …errors

FX: BUZZER

DANNY: Bladderwrack.

MIKE: Correct.

DANNY: [NARR. ASIDE] … On full Auto-pilot now…

MIKE: Which tower….?

FX: BUZZER

DANNY: Nanking. [NARR. ASIDE] Years of practice…

MIKE: What shape…?

FX: BUZZER

DANNY: Ellipse. [NARR. ASIDE] … in smoky pubs…

MIKE: Who said…?

FX: BUZZER

DANNY: Mozart. [NARR. ASIDE]…. had finely tuned my technique…

MIKE: Where…?

FX: BUZZER

DANNY: In a brothel [NARR. ASIDE]…. Don't analyse …

MIKE: When…?

FX: BUZZER

DANNY: 1853. [NARR. ASIDE]… Don't think…

FX: BUZZER

MIKE: Why…?

FX: BUZZER

DANNY: Nought….[NARR. ASIDE] Keep the…

MIKE: How…?

FX: BUZZER

DANNY: Pole-axe…[ASIDE] Rhythm ….

MIKE: Which..?

FX: BUZZER

DANNY: Patton…[ASIDE] Ticking…Along…Ahead on points…I can't be caught until…

MIKE: I need the singer, title and date…

MUSIC: MADONNA: "LIFE IS A PRAYER"

FX: BUZZER

DANNY: Madonna…Life is a Prayer….19…19…

MIKE: Have to hurry you…

DANNY: [DISTORTION] ….I'm not sure I can…

MIX TO:

FLASHBACK:

SC 24:CROSSLEY'S BEDROOM. NIGHT - 1989

MUSIC: MADONNA: "LIKE A PRAYER" CONTINUES ON RADIO 1

JOYCE: I'm not sure I can…..

MIKE (DAD): (DRUNK BUT GENTLE) Trust me…..

JOYCE: I do but….(STARTS TO SOB)

MIKE: But what? - I'm your husband.

JOYCE: I can't give it to you Mike….

MIKE: I need the cash now Joyce…. I haven't much time…

JOYCE: …that's all I've got for Danny's clothes…

VINCE: (CONCERNED) Give it to him Joyce.

MUSIC: BECOMES DISTORTED

Scene continues

The scene concludes with Danny recalling the moment when he last saw his father, drunk and violent, whom he'd mistakenly replaced with Mike to sublimate the painful reality. The *Beat the Clock* show is abruptly stopped as Danny faints with the anxiety of the visualisation. Uncle Vince is finally revealed in a new light as an honourable man who had protected Joyce from his brother's brutality. The play closes with Vince confessing to Danny that his father committed suicide. Danny and Vince agree a fresh contract of trust as they both recognise that knowledge and friendship are more valuable than prize money and celebrity.

The scenes above exemplify the disruptive non-naturalistic and disorientating techniques used to subvert the linear narrative. The intention is to disturb and provoke the audience. Scene 23 has the quality of staccato rhythmic montage, antiphonal sound patterns jumping from internal to external narration. Other methods I employed include lengthy confessional monologues, flashbacks, flash-forwards, nightmares, parallel time-lines, time jumps, fractured dialogue, soundscaped atmospheres, displaced audio perspective, sound distortion and echo, musical motifs to trigger memory, and symbolist imagery in the form of a snarling bear that *Danny* imagines stalks his bedroom. My aim was to give a dark, edgy psychological texture and depth to the characters by creating an audio *mise-en-scène* equivalent to a German expressionist film. As Lotte H. Eisner explains in *The Haunted Screen*, '[e]xpressionism sets itself against naturalism with its mania for recording mere facts…Facts and objects are nothing in themselves: we need to study their essence rather than their momentary and accidental forms' (1973: 10-11). Many of the features that characterised expressionist cinema such as the 'preoccupation with rendering *Stimmung'* (mood) by suggesting the 'vibrations of the soul' are traditionally linked to the use of light (1973:199). I attempted to represent those 'vibrations' of *Danny*'s tortured soul through the use of sound.

Mirroring the expressionist signifiers of nostalgia, desire and lust 'amid the chaos of things' (1973: 199), the narrative of *Brain of Brighouse* contains a complexity of fantasy motifs - Danny's fantasy to find the truth about his father; Danny's fantasy that Mike Coster *is* his father; Vince's fantasy to escape poverty through Danny; Danny's fantasy to find a loving companion; Joyce's fantasy to be able to tell the truth to Danny and repair a fractured family unit. These fantasies are also linked to past fantasies and nostalgias of lust, greed and danger as symbolised by the spectre of Danny's violent father and symbolised in the present by Danny's mystical nightmare bear. Indeed the central premise of the play – a general knowledge prodigy capable of winning a TV show – can also be seen as an absurd fantasy. It is this combination of fantasies that demand non-naturalistic treatment but, at the same time, support naturalistic character development within a conventional three-act structure – harmony amongst the chaos. This tension of stylistic construction, expressionistic/naturalistic, represents yet another creative binary which appears as a consistent characteristic in all my plays.

The ambition to create this dark aural *Stimmung* was an attempt to promote a psychological depth to the motivations of the characters beyond the written word. It is an element of the *mise-en-scène* that cannot be pre-scripted, in both senses of that word. At its most successful, these atmospheres of fantasy trigger an emotional response in the listener not prescribed by the author's words alone. As James Donald concludes

> In the perpetual motion not only of the narrative's *mise-en-scène* and the spectator's oscillating points of identification, but also in the endless chain of cultural associations that the spectator [and listener] brings to bear in elaborating those engagements, there

> is no arrival at a point of origin either 'in the world' or 'the subject'. The subject emerges in the negotiation of this realm of representations - a symbolic order whose form, function and authority are at least partially organised and reproduced through the operation of the original fantasies…It is this bringing together of the psychoanalytic, the cultural and the political that opens up new questions and possibilities. (Donald 1989: 144)

New questions and possibilities were certainly provoked by the *Brighouse* production especially when considering fresh approaches to *mise-en-scène* theory. As there was no published review of the production the reception of the play, anecdotally at least, appeared to divide listeners. Presumably this play was deemed a tough listen containing challenging and uncomfortable subject matter. But I suspect more relevantly that the play also demanded much of the audience aurally due to the non-naturalistic *mise-en-scène*, unusual for Radio 4 where naturalistic drama is the dominant form. However, Richard Murphy confirms the positive benefits of such non-conformist endeavour in the context of the expressionist avant-garde:

> rather than reinforcing, through mimetic faithfulness the sense of the objective world's immovable solidity – as is frequently the case, for example, even with the most radical and revolutionary works of naturalism – it undermines the conventional representational categories, in particular by effacing the boundaries between subject and object (1999: 120)…. In other words, the expressionist avant-garde leads to a provocation which draws out of the reader [and listener] those petrified and rationalistic constructions of meaning which the institution of art has made conventional. (1999: 141)

Multi-genre and *auteur* theory: *Four Steps to Heaven*

Four Steps to Heaven (Peters, 2006) also deals with difficult subject matter, that of religious conversion. Set in the mid-1980s, the play presents a bitter-sweet rites-of-passage drama that focuses on shifting cultural and religious attitudes, the power of prejudice and the necessary pain accompanying change and ultimately forgiveness. However, I felt the stylistic tone and *mise-en-scène* demanded a less overtly dark expressionist approach than for *Brighouse*, although there are certainly non-naturalistic elements essential to the drama, such as the unreliable first-person narrator monologues, flashbacks and time-shifts. Regrettably, in my view, two nightmare quasi-expressionist scenes set in an operating theatre where the lead character experiences the terror of circumcision were cut in the edit due to the play running over-time. However the most notable stylistic development was the interweaving of naturalistic drama with an eclectic fusion of music and comedy forms, including stand-up comedy routines and a plethora of Yiddish jokes.

The narrative follows mild-mannered gentile Chris Batty, a failed actor-comedian who because of his love for Jewish trainee doctor Caroline Solomon decides to convert to Judaism. This is not because of any strong belief-system but a strategy in order to win the acceptance of Caroline's family who have set themselves against such a blasphemy, as they see it. As part of the tortuous process of conversion which is detailed in the play, it is the spectre of circumcision that gives Chris second thoughts. The second-act turning point where Caroline reveals that she is pregnant by Chris still does not convince Caroline's bigoted father Sid that Chris is a worthy suitor. The play concludes with Chris demonstrating his honourable and moral integrity supporting Caroline when she miscarries. But it is the

revelation of the dark secret that Caroline's mother Ruth has harboured for thirty years that finally leads to family acceptance. Ruth's father was a non-Jew who married in secret to avoid community prejudice and alienation - a situation Ruth is determined not to repeat when the happiness of Caroline is her primary concern.

Because of BBC sensitivities surrounding issues dealing with religious topics (as mentioned when discussing compliance guidelines), I undertook twelve months of research prior to recording, including visits to synagogues, discussions with Jewish elders, an invitation to a Rabbi's home, as well as the presentation of at least six drafts to the BBC. The first of the two producers assigned to the project felt nervous enough to add an explanatory note on the application to the commissioning editor: 'NB - Lloyd has researched key details with both academics and Orthodox Rabbis to ensure the credibility of the storyline…' who confirm '…that there is "universal acceptance" of the Orthodox convert if the protocols (outlined in this proposal) have been followed correctly.'

Chris comments in first-person confessional address to the audience on his preference for the New Wave style of popular music, which is altogether gentler than the aggressive antagonism of Punk. The era and music act as a cultural backdrop mirroring the themes of emotional transformation and forgiveness in the play and New Romantic music punctuates sequences to act as a bridge between scenes. The non-naturalistic device of confessional voice-over narration provides an effective tension between the characters' conflicted inner emotions and their outward masked expressions of deceit during social interaction. This antagonistic contradiction is especially appropriate given the central themes of the play - deception and truthful revelation. As the play reaches a climax, the barriers between these two conflicted states of truth become blurred and intertwined. Crucially the monologue device is also effective as an audience identifier technique creating a bond of trust between lead character and listener as they are taken on Chris's journey of discovery. Although still rare in radio drama, the binary confessional device of depicting inner truths/outer deceits within the scene is a common cinematic device and it is no accident that Woody Allen's 1979 film *Manhattan* was an important influence in the construction of the play's structure. It also informed the content, as Chris continually quotes Allen's jokes in a desperate and doomed attempt to impress his girlfriend.

The collaborative influences I identified during the production of *A Higher Education* are again paramount in the creation of *Four Steps to Heaven.* The major influence concerning the construction of *Heaven* was the creative partnership of writer and director. As already described, all radio dramas go through an extensive process of re-write, feedback, re-draft and script editing. However, this play is a primary example of how the content, tone and *mise-en-scène* evolved due to a close working relationship between author and the second assigned producer/director Gary Brown. Having been friends since primary and secondary school and then university, Brown and I have worked together regularly on a number of creative projects including performing as alternative comedy duo Foot and Mouth at the original Comedy Store in Soho, London in the 1980s. It is though not solely a question of a shared sense of humour. Equally relevant is the shared secular Jewish sensibility. Dealing with a sensitive subject, our cultural and religious experiences were critical in suggesting content -Yiddish jokes and music for example - but in the context of producing drama that did not contravene BBC compliance guidelines.

More than this, the script underwent several changes, all for the better. For instance, I wrote originally that Auntie Betty harboured the dark secret that she converted to Judaism. But after prolonged discussions it was felt that the denouement would have greater power if the secret

belonged to Caroline's mother Ruth, a more immediate family member, thus increasing the feeling of anxiety and betrayal. What further added to the energy of this final confrontation scene was Brown's direction to improvise much of the latter part using the script as a template. He encouraged the actors to overlap lines, interrupt each other (using my signature ellipses as a guide) and invent their own dialogue. It certainly increased the dynamism and emotional intensity of the scene and made it sound less scripted and more authentically fraught.

SC:35 INT. CAROLINE'S BEDROOM [EXTRACT]

FX: CAROLINE PACKING

RUTH: ….believe me, I've tried to tell you a thousand times…I could never….(face)…I'm sorry Caroline.

CAROLINE: So what are you telling me now - you're Catholic?

RUTH: No - Judaism follows the maternal line. My mother was Jewish - So I'm Jewish. But others didn't see it that way. Mum and Dad took a lot of abuse from the family - so did I.

CAROLINE: Why?

RUTH: This was the 40's. The most important taboo was not to leave the tribe. Mum broke that band of faith and we all suffered. But that's why it's so important you live your own life..…

CAROLINE: Why didn't your Dad convert?

RUTH: Didn't want to - he loved the Latin….funny - so did I. The situation was unpleasant but tolerable - until I met Sid…

CAROLINE: Meaning…?

RUTH: ….we wanted to get married, but at that time, we couldn't find an Orthodox *Shull* to accept us…I wasn't seen as 100% *kosher* …unless my mum and dad married in synagogue…(HESITANT) Eventually, we found a solution…

CAROLINE: I don't understand - Rabbis are forbidden to perform mixed faith weddings…yet your father wouldn't convert…so….

RUTH: … we found a Rabbi who would turn a blind eye…. pretend Dad was Jewish….who would bless their marriage…sign the contract… proclaim it *kosher* - and then marry Sid and me….

CAROLINE: But all that's …a lie…

RUTH: Don't you see - we were determined that *you* wouldn't carry any stigma - that you wouldn't suffer like we had…. It seemed "the right thing" to do at the time…

CAROLINE: "Right thing"!….What Rabbi would do a thing like (that)….?.

RUTH: That's not important…

CAROLINE: (RILED) It's important to me…I want the truth - now.

Scene End

The changes to the script were as a result of constant re-working with director and actors. Multiple rehearsals on the studio floor and several takes, especially of the scene above, changed the content and texture of the words submitted and eventually recorded. This kind of rigorous re-drafting is rare in radio production due to shortage of time and limited budgets. Also, most collaborations between writer and director are fleeting, hierarchical and critically separated creatively. The partnership Brown and I have established over 45 years creates an atmosphere of trust and respect that serves as the foundation for true collaborative working and suggests a re-framing of traditional *auteur* theory especially in the audio sphere would be appropriate. It seems to me a strongly confirmatory instance of the way the collaborative ethos can be seen as a 'freedom of possibilities for all those involved to discover an emphasis on a way of working that supports intuition, spontaneity, and an accumulation of ideas' (Oddey 2000: 1).

Cultural voices and *auteur:* Goodbye Mr Gherkin

Challenging questions concerning authorship and collaboration were certainly posed with my commission to write the first episode of the series *Take Away*. This was a set of five dramas written by different authors that considered the changing fortunes of The Battered Devil, a Leeds takeaway food shop that is owned by proprietors of different races down through the decades. The series aimed to explore the various owners' interaction with the local community and also the tensions between first- and subsequent generation immigrant families. My episode, *Goodbye Mr Gherkin* (Peters, 2007) was the first of the series.

The narrative of *Goodbye Mr Gherkin* described how the present-day Polish proprietors attempt to make a living despite a reduction in demand for traditional fish and chips. Owner Ivon decides to diversify by offering Polish food on the menu much to the scepticism of his sexist, irascible and ill father Otto. This scheme goes disastrously wrong when Ivon's long-suffering wife Zita discovers the stack of unpaid bills of unsold Polish supplies hidden in a drawer. Zita decides that they need to sell the shop, downsize and pay back the loan that Otto has lent them. Ivon would retrain as a teacher and Otto would need to go into a nursing home as they are unable to look after him any longer. Otto refuses and blames Zita for turning everyone against him. This main narrative line is mirrored by the sub-plot which examines Otto and Zita's son Jan who, eager for the latest trendy goods, mixes with the wrong crowd – a gang of drug dealers. Jan ends up being assaulted by the gang after he loses their contraband. The climax of the piece is located at a Polish festival Andrzejk where the unpalatable secrets of the past finally re-surface.

SC 34: EXT. POLISH CLUB NIGHT.

FX: RAIN

FX: FOOTSTEPS APPROACH

IVON: Ah Otto. Something important's come up –

OTTO: (AGITATED) Yes it has.

IVON: Not another chat. My bladder can't stand anymore…

OTTO: No more chats. I need to hear it from you.

IVON: Hear what?

OTTO: November 30th 2004.

IVON: What about it?

OTTO: That night – tell me about it.

IVON: 3 years ago!… My memory isn't that…(good)

OTTO: I need to know….

IVON: What you talking about?

OTTO: Did you do it?

IVON: Do what?

OTTO: Assault my wife?

IVON: Is that what she said?

OTTO: Did you do it?

IVON: I told you - She's mad…

OTTO: Yes or no?

IVON: …or bad…

OTTO: (SHOUTS) *Yes or no*…?!

IVON: (ANGRY. TEETH CLICK INCREASINGLY) *No,* of course not D*ebil!* You're so blind Otto. Can't you see her game? She wants me out of my own house …she wants control of the shop…and because she can't get rid of me, she's spreading poison. Turning you against me with...obscene…lies…

OTTO: That night Ivon…!?

IVON: … that night…I tell you about that night…One year after my beautiful Mary died… the hours I spend …teaching your wife…everything…and what do I get back *that night*? Sympathy?… affection? Nothing…not even a smile… I try to make her smile…so I give her a peck…a tickle that's all…so what?…women like attention…but not her…You know what she does?...she slaps me…hits an 80 year old man… …breaks my dentures…never found a set to fit since… violent *kurwo blago* - who the hell duth she think she ith?.. cold bitch….but we won't let her get away with it, will we?...blood'th thicker than…that……

FX: ZITA FOOTSTEPS APPROACH

…..we'll show her Otto…..We'll beat her... whip her *dupa*…Won't we…? We'll whip her *dupa,* won't we…*Tak?*….*Tak*?**....***TAK?* (HIATUS)

(CALMER) If I've left anything out - just ask me....

OTTO: (EMPTY) Monster - How could you…?

IVON: Memory's not good…long time…..look – it was a …misunderstanding…if you think I…(*made*)…that I owe... (*an apology*)…owe you one. Then fine – I'm prepared…prepared to say it…

ZITA: It's too late Ivon. All too late……You've wet yourself.

End of Scene

Otto's confessional monologue above was inspired by the Humphrey Bogart climactic speech in the 1954 film *The Caine Mutiny* where as Captain Queeg he gradually crumbles in the witness-box, becomes incoherently paranoid and discredits himself under the pressure. The clacking steel worry balls that Bogart rolls around in his hand are here replaced with Otto's chattering and ill-fitting dentures. Again this scene was a stylistic experiment, unusual in radio drama, to subvert naturalistic narrative with a non-naturalistic textured *mise-en-scène.*

The staccato antiphonal one-liners of the first part of the scene are contrasted with the later fractured pauses and incomplete phrases of Ivon's final speeches. These are indicated by the ellipses that I use consistently to signify emotional turmoil. The overall tonal texture of *Goodbye Mr Gherkin* resembles *Brain of Brighouse* and *Four Steps to Heaven* as it again features unreliable audience identifiers and the emergence of dark secrets from repressed memories.

Conventional *auteur* theories promoting a singular authorial voice are again challenged with the development of the *Goodbye Mr Gherkin* script. Notwithstanding six months of textual research and personal meetings required to present an authentic Polish immigrant experience, the script was redrafted many times following discussions with producer/director Gary Brown. The back-story of each character, cross-checked against the recorded historical context of Polish immigration, was meticulously constructed and re-worked to provide accurate character relationships and motivations. The inclusion of Polish vocabulary, expressions, festivals, cookery (to coincide with BBC on-line recipes as the series was broadcast) provided an essential back-drop to the narrative action and was often suggested following discussions with Polish people I interviewed. This project was a prime example of creative collaborative working with a variety of authorial and cultural voices that were represented in the final script. It provides a counter to film-director Richard Lester's assertion that a director (or writer) 'is to be an absolute dictator and produce a personal vision on a subject that he has chosen' (cited in Gelmis 1970: xi).

Lester's traditional view of the supremacy of an *auteur* director or writer's personal vision is challenged by the multi-collaborative inputs that created the *Take Away* series. The genesis of the series tracing different immigrant groups down the decades was a concept suggested by producer-director Gary Brown. This construct together with the over-lapping characters and the fish shop history had a significant effect on the style, tone and narrative of the script. For example, the name and status of The Battered Devil needed to be reinforced in every script to provide continuity and clarity to the listener, as in this exchange:

ZITA: …..Where's the savings book?

OTTO: Er….bottom drawer.

FX: DRAWER OPENS

ZITA: Nope - deeds to The Battered Devil…always wondered why it's called that.

OTTO: No idea – but we're not allowed to change …

This rather mechanistic device prepares the listener for the reveal that finally explains the unusual name of the chip shop in the concluding fifth episode. Recurring sign-post indicators also help remind the audience of essential previously presented plot information and are characteristic of television and radio continual serial drama. These given constraints act as a template influencing the narrative as well as the stylistic tone by establishing a unifying house style for the series. However, the creative tension of ensuring continuity *and* at the same time injecting fresh interpretive story-telling provides the series with energy and interest. Each writer adds their own personal voice, or more accurately their collated collaborative voices, within the prescribed limits of the given template. This challenge to traditional sole-voice definitions of *auteur* theory mirrors the long-running debate surrounding theatre authorship. As Avra Sidoropoulou puts it:

> Today, increasingly complex concerns pertaining to the question of the theatre text's authorship and the ethics of performance permeate auteur practice. In essence, the prevailing dialectic in theatre research has to do with what exactly constitutes "meaning" in the theatre and whether it is predetermined by the playwright, served and/or re-imagined by the director and/or performer, or ultimately, constructed anew by the individual spectator. Similarly, this debate brings into sharper focus the issues of the dramatic text as simply one among the many ingredients of the performance event, along with set, costume, music, choreography, etc; at the same, it explores the subordination of the dramatic text to the "totality" of the mise-en-scene, the boundaries of directorial freedom and the re-definition of directorial interpretation and ultimately, the issues of authority, trust, and the playwright's and director's mutual fear of giving in (to each other, as well as to the reality of live performance). (Sidoropoulou 2009: 248-249)

Sidoropoulou also cites Patrice Pavis's theories that propose the primary driver of theatrical production interpretation is the director's reading of the text which in turn informs the *mise-en-scène* when coupled with the spectator's reception of this reading. This is further complicated in the radio sphere where writer, director, actors and technicians collaborate closely to shape the final script and *mise-en-scène* of the recording. It is worth emphasizing that I have been invited to attend all recordings of my plays by the producer/directors with the express intention of allowing me to suggest new material, cuts and even directorial advice to actors. My attendance at the recordings also has the added benefit of the director being able to call on me as an additional voice performer when required.

Roland Barthes' theories on the 'open text' further reinforce the premise that there are a complex multiplicity of inputs and intertextual references informing the totality of the *mise-en-scène*. These contributions then converge with the reception by each audience member to uniquely decode and interpret.

> We have therefore, a genuinely polyphonic system of information which is theatrical; a *destiny of signs*…the theatre constitutes a semiotically privileged object, since its system is apparently original (polyphonic) compared to that of language (which is linear). (Barthes 1972: 29)

In the scene above, for example, the re-working of the Humphrey Bogart 'confession' was a key intertextual inspiration for Otto's final speeches. Therefore, this tapestry of interwoven, multi-layered, intertextual inputs is as relevant to radio as theatre production. It is also evident that each named commissioned author will accentuate their particular signature priority – in my case an emphasis on non-naturalistic dialogue and soundscaping. However, the director, technicians and actors will inevitably mould and remould this priority to suit their personal taste and individual skills within the context of house style and the external editorial and compliance guidelines. Thus, 'all in all, we should view *mise-en-scène* as a vehicle, a system that may bring us closer to the playwright's original conception of the world, but which does so through added layers of interpretative associations' (Pavis 1993: 147).

Mise-en-scène and audience: *Bell in the Ball*

Connected core themes challenging traditional templates of radio drama can again be identified in the narrative and form of the *Bell in the Ball* (Peters, 2010) commission. My

aim was to continue writing challenging content complemented by ambitious non-naturalistic stylistic soundscaping.

The narrative concerns exuberant, sports journalist Danny Thompson who loses his sight on Millennium Eve 1999 in a bar-room brawl at The Friendly Arms pub. Despite Danny's apparent good-humour, his long-suffering girlfriend Beth recognises that this is a brave face masking his inner frustrations. Danny's introduction to the sporting world of blind cricket is both challenging and painful. To score runs, batsman attempt to strike a large plastic ball filled with iron filings bowled on a conventional cricket wicket. This can be seen by partially sighted players and heard by wholly blind cricketers. Danny is mentored by jovial all-rounder Floyd Richards (blind West Indian) who appears to take far too much pleasure in striking him about the body when bowling. However, Danny slowly rediscovers the camaraderie and a sense of belonging that club membership bestows. It is evident Danny has fallen in love with this new magical world of sound and action. Danny's progress from novice batsman to accomplished batsman impresses ruthless club manager Brian and despite competition Brian picks him for the prestigious knockout final. But as he prepares to set off for a risky single Danny's mind flashbacks to that fateful night in The Friendly Arms. The awful truth dawns on Danny that he was responsible for provoking his assailant by making sexist remarks about his attacker's girlfriend. Danny stops mid-wicket aghast – and retires hurt. Danny can lay his own demons to rest at last by finally accepting the truth of his own situation. Danny crucially realises how fortunate he has been, apologises to Beth for his indolence over the past ten years and determines to make amends.

The climax of the play includes the twist whereby Danny finally realises that he provoked the aggression that led to his blinding:

SCENE 24a: EXT. HEADINGLEY CRICKET PITCH. DAY

FX: BALL WHISTLES THROUGH AIR;

DANNY: (V/O) The Magic Void. The Waiting. Isn't this all childish ego? Do I really need a bat in my hand to replace the eyes in my head?....Stop! Relax!…Imagine what brings most joy. Beth. Beth on the boundary. She's running.… White summer dress billowing in a warm breeze. Yellow flowers round the hem. How beautiful she is. I see her so clearly. Clear as a bell…hear the bell, from ages past…Prepare to strike…for the team…for Beth.

FX: BAT ON BALL.

BRIAN: Great shot Danny! Run two Bob!

OMNES: CHEERS. "COMING LEFT MAURICE"…. "RUN ONE"

BRIAN RUNNNN now….

DANNY: I have a runner. I don't RUN anywhere ….

BRIAN RUNNNNNN now…

MIX TO:

SC 24b: FLASHBACK. INT. FRIENDLY ARMS. NEW YEAR'S EVE 2008.

ROGER: (DRUNK) Runnn Now!!

DANNY: (DRUNK) I don't RUN anywhere.

ROGER: Typical journo…full of fancy words but …

DANNY: No brains these traders….

ROGER: ….you can't actually play…Even if I paid yer...

DANNY: …know the price of everything and the value of nothing.

ROGER: Whereas I was picked for Millwall Reserves…

DANNY: Were they short of a ball-boy then?

ROGER: You can sneer…'cos you're jealous…

DANNY: Jealous of a Millwall reserve?!

ROGER: Typical Yorkie Leeds scum…..Go shag some sheep…

DANNY: I only shag animals with waxed legs.

ROGER: Eh?

DANNY: I'll give you fifty quid.

ROGER: For what?

DANNY: Your bit of skirt…

ROGER: You crazy man?

DANNY: No - nice arse Stacey.

ROGER: That's totally out of order!…

DANNY: OK - a hundred quid to shag her. C'mon Roger, I'm talking your lingo here. I'm moving out of sterling and into gold. Bet she'd do it for nothing actually…(SCUFFLE) Hey! Get your hands off me shirt!

ROGER: You'd better run scum boy!

DANNY: I don't RUN anywhere.

ROGER: I'm going to kill you.

DANNY: Put the bottle down you pillock…

ROGER: (SHOUTED) RUNN now!

DANNY: NOOOO!

BETH: NOOOO!

FX: SCREAMS, SMASHES, MADONNA ETC. AS BEFORE

End of Scene

The director/producer and I discussed the idea that in the scene above Danny could have made a racist comment to Roger instead of a sexist slur about his girlfriend. This would have not only been more dramatic but would have reflected the themes of the play more powerfully by reinforcing the notion that even likeable victims can also be unacceptably obnoxious at times. It would also have mirrored the thematic thread that Danny's best friend and mentor in the cricket team is a black Jamaican. However, the inclusion of any racist acts or racist language however contextualised would need to be cleared at a high executive level within the BBC and would most likely be refused – especially as this play was commissioned for an afternoon drama slot, when controversial topics tend to be avoided.

The story was inspired from my cricketing experiences of having played against blind teams (and lost). The research included meetings with blind authors, commentators and visits to blind cricket teams to ensure the authenticity of the storyline. The principal aim of the play was to present a fun, heartfelt, uplifting and informative listening experience - the comedy celebrating the triumph of self-respect over self-pity. Again I used the non-naturalistic techniques of an unreliable narrator as audience-identifier, voice-overs, flashback and flash-forwards.

Although the numbers of blind and visually impaired radio listeners are not specifically recorded by RAJAR, the appeal of radio to this audience is well documented. In Paul Carter's on-line article for Disabilitynow, Peter White, blind columnist and presenter of Radio 4's *In Touch* programme, reconfirms blind people's affinity with radio.

> Blind and visually impaired people are a very obvious radio audience: we rely quite heavily on radio for information. Things have improved to some extent with technology but it's still easier to turn on the radio than pick up a newspaper. (Carter 2011)

However, the contentious debate concerning the labeling of radio as a 'blind medium' serves as a useful context when considering the efficacy of the medium as a whole and the production of *Bell in the Ball* specifically.

> Why … define radio's status as a non-visual medium in terms connoting impairment, disability and lack rather than positive attributes such as power and magic? The repeated use of the words 'blind' and 'blindness' to describe radio would suggest that those writing about radio consider its lack of visuals to be a problem rather than a positive attribute: as something to be overcome rather than exploited. (Shingler in Shingler and Wieringa, 1998: 74)

Tim Crook's chapter entitled 'Radio drama is *not* a blind medium' in *Radio Drama* agrees that the blind metaphor may suggest a limited or 'disabled means of communication' (1999: 62) and argues that notions of radio's blindness should be abandoned:

> [T]he degree of signification in radio or sound goes beyond the superficial and subtextural layers of the sound itself and must encompass the interaction with memory, other media and contextualization…. So much stress has been placed on the mind's eye or the image generated by the mind, that an essential feature of the human experience in drama - 'emotion' and 'feeling' has been overlooked…. By giving the listener the opportunity to create an individual filmic narrative and experience through

> the imaginative spectacle the listener becomes an extra participant and 'dramaturgist' in the process of communication and listening. This participation is physical, intellectual and emotional. (Crook 1999: 60, 61, 66)

It was in this context that I was determined to present the world of a blind central character and include the audience as an 'extra participant' in that character's space through an 'individual filmic narrative'. The most ambitious stylistic objective was to present an impressionistic *mise-en-scène* - a soundscape of music and effects to connect the listener with Danny's now aural world. For example, this included the whistles of the ball in the air; the changing pitch of the ball on grass; the thump of the bat on ball; the instructions from the players; the crowd of instructional voices. I had intended that the soundscaping was to be considered as if it were an additional character in the drama and I requested extra post-production sessions so this could be achieved. Sadly due to time and financial constraints, only limited fragments of the originally planned soundscaping remain, although they are arguably the most effective aural element of the piece. Again external factors - collaborative and non-collaborative - were paramount in shaping the tone and style of the completed piece.

An essential component, already addressed, that assists the reframing of *auteur* and *mise-en-scène* theories is a consideration of the relationship between production and receiver. Pavis reinforces the idea

> that mise en scène can no longer ignore the spectator and must include him or her as the receptive pole in a circuit between the mise en scène produced by artists and the hypothesis of the spectators, artistically involved themselves in the mise en scène. (1988: 99-100)

This analysis of theatre spectatorship can be equally and appropriately applied to radio production and the reception by the listener. However, much modernist and post-modernist theatre (from Brecht's Epic theatre to Forced Entertainment) has striven to involve, stimulate and provoke its audience. The term 'breaking the fourth wall' as a means to inhabit or share audience space, can have two separate and distinct consequences, although they often co-exist and overlap in a theatrical context. Firstly, it is devised as a deconstructive strategy to disrupt passive spectatorship and *directly*, often physically, involve the audience in the performance; and secondly it is devised as a deconstructive strategy to disrupt passive spectatorship and break the complacency of an audience comfortable with a naturalistic suspension of disbelief aesthetic.

By its very nature, radio can not easily *directly* or physically involve the audience in a drama production. However, the latter strategy of puncturing the 'fourth wall', designed to provoke, surprise and engage an audience in a non- or anti-naturalistic manner is a particularly powerful tool that, surprisingly, still remains uncommon in contemporary radio drama. *Bell in the Ball* was another attempt to breach the traditional naturalistic radio 'fourth wall' utilising an eclectic mix of non-naturalistic, non-linear and impressionistic techniques.

If, as I argue, that radio audience reception also needs to be considered and no longer ignored in reframing *auteur* and *mise-en-scène* theory, the debates surrounding the reaction to *Bell in the Ball* adds a further layer of complexity in that

> [h]ow others represent us (disabled people), how others who are able-bodied write about and perform our disability experiences, is not always how we write about, define ourselves…. Just as the critical black female spectator must resist dominant ways of knowing and seeing, so too must disabled people. (Cheu 2005: 136)

The themes concerning the representation of visual disability were taken up by blind presenter Peter White in a discussion during the *In Touch* programme that previewed *Bell in the Ball.* The concerns of representation were also discussed at academic conferences prompting much debate and controversy notably at the International Federation of Theatre Research (IFTR) Disability and Performance Working Group (Santiago, Chile, July 2012). My response to these difficult issues was to explain that *Bell in the Ball* attempted to contextualise the experience of one character's journey and to explore what Petra Kuppers calls 'the unknowing of difference' (Kuppers 2005: 159) through an aural soundscape of dialogue, music and effects. Kuppers's conclusion on two performance installations 'where difference is exciting and interesting, not swallowed up in the certainties of social meaning, with its distinction between normal and other' (159) appears to be an equally appropriate commentary on *Bell in the Ball:*

> They challenge the assumptions of visual symptomatology, clear photos, stages with delineated positions, and a choreographed theater of stares. Instead they implicate the viewer [and listener] in a physical engagement with the machinery of knowledge and encounters. (Kuppers 2005, 159)

Although it is difficult to achieve a 'physical engagement' with listeners on radio, I would argue that *Bell in the Ball* was an experiment in aural engagement that provoked a strong audience reaction. This is evidenced by the continuing debate and discussion surrounding the drama and testament to the success of a *mise-en-scène* that disrupted traditional fourth wall radio narrative.

Conclusion

> [E]quality and friendship … are part of the human aspect of collaboration.… Ownership of text, or ego-generated protection of an idea or a piece of text, can cripple any Joint Collaboration…. We gave up preciousness of the text and always trusted that the collective effort was going to be stronger than the individual one. (Brien and Brady 2004)

As I have shown, in the cinematic sphere *auteur* theory has been described as an intentional strategy to increase directorial status and control over the *mise-en-scène*. For example, the 1950s and 1960s saw the proliferation of cinema posters announcing the director's credit above the title of the film, a marketing device still employed today. This also had the inevitable effect of suggesting directorial authorship over all the production elements and was used as a powerful promotion tool designed at that time to counter television's increasing popularity. In terms of academic critical response, there was also an inward-looking evaluation of the importance of the director's style which reinforced the pre-eminence of the signature directorial *auteur* in both form and content. As Phillips explains,

> [i]nstead of broadening the study of film into wider political and cultural debates, *auteur* theory led inwards towards pedantic and trivial debates about who was and who was not an *auteur* (rather than a *metteur-en-scene*) and what precisely were the features that constituted *auteur* signature. (1996: 151)

However, a paradoxical reaction of these self-reflexive responses was that critics examined more closely the components of *mise-en-scène* as the primary site of *auteur* theory. One of the fundamental elements often under-valued or even overlooked until relatively recently,

emerged from the shadows in the nineteen-seventies and eighties, namely the script and scriptwriter as the primary impetus for film directorial interpretation:

> it was through an attempt to establish a romantic, author-centred model for film that the concept of genre began to take on a more positive meaning in film criticism. (Feuer 1992: 142)

What is important when considering new approaches to *auteur* theory is that radio, in contrast to cinema, has never been dominated by an overtly director-centred top-down hierarchy. This may have much to do with the exhaustive commissioning process I have described above where the primary driver for script development and production is overwhelmingly the strength of the story idea rather than the vision of a 'named' director. This is unsurprising in a BBC context as its staff radio director/producers are immersed in a corporate culture that, arguably, both innately and intentionally discourages individual voices. However, it is also true to say that there is only a handful of named radio drama writers who command signature status as they are required to submit ideas to the same commissioning process as any other writer.

It is important to signal and discuss an apparent contradiction at the heart of the thesis, namely the tension between the construction of new challenging radio material that establishes a writer as a significant signature creator *and* at the same time the collaborative nature of those influences that encourage and contribute to this 'signature' creation, all within the prescribed limits of BBC editorial and compliance regulations. However, it is my contention that although this may appear paradoxical, I propose that these seemingly oppositional concepts are not mutually exclusive.

For example, the broadcast of my most recent play *From Fact to Fiction: Sochi - Living the Dream* (Peters, 2014) was preceded by the on-air announcement of my name and status as a comedy writer. However, the construction of the final draft script (in three days) was as a result of close collaborative working and redrafting with producer/director Gary Brown. My presence at the recording of the production was an essential part of the scripting and directing process as I was required to re-write dialogue and cut entire scenes. Other members of the production team also suggested re-writes, cuts, new dialogue and sound effects. The final broadcast script was edited from over 15 minutes to 13 minutes 45 seconds. Although the piece contained my signature non-naturalistic elements - including inner confessional monologues - the script was a process of creative collaboration from the entire production team. The script was also one episode of a series that had a pre-determined house style and construct and was subject to all the compliance checks of executive producer and Head of Radio Drama that also influenced content and *mise-en-scène*.

It is the degree of mutual trust that an *auteur* can develop with his or her collaborators that produces a successfully collective *mise-en-scène*. I would contend that radio encourages and produces a much more collaborative non-hierarchical working environment. In the five BBC Radio 4 plays that constitute my portfolio of published works, as well as in the critical explication of their production in this accompanying thesis, the detail of the collaborative practice confirms this reading. But it is a sum of all the elements discussed through the thesis that helps move us towards a new approach to the practice and theories of radio *auteur* and *mise-en-scène* in broadcast radio drama: the historical legacies and technologies of radio production; the external broadcasting environment (government and BBC policy); the internal broadcasting environment (compliance and commissioning process); the audience

profile and reception; the signature emphases of author and director; and crucially the chemistry of collaboration and trust.

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PART II

Portfolio

This collection of scripts, critical articles and cds represents the supporting documentation for the PhD by Published Work. Wherever possible the final draft script presented to the director-producer is reprinted here. However as signalled in my research, there are always changes to the final broadcast script at every stage of the rehearsal, recording and post-production process. This supporting material represents a small amount of the total research produced during this period; other material would include previous script drafts, research notes, interviews with actors and fellow collaborators.

Broadcast Play Details

The details of the five key practical outputs examined are listed below. The information is presented in chronological order.

1. *A Higher Education*

Transmission date: BBC Radio 4, 20 June 20 2000;
repeated on BBC Radio 7, 10 and 11 January 2011;
repeated BBC Radio 4 Extra, 28 and 29 October 2011;
repeated Radio 4 Extra, 4 and 5 December 2012;
repeated Radio 4 Extra, 26 March 2014.

Narrative outline
Comedy-drama. Panic strikes a university drama department as a 'siege' situation unfolds. A depressed lecturer locks himself in a studio, with a shy student and a gun which may or may not be the real thing. Then a drunk parent turns up, followed by the police who witness the 'performance to end all performances'.

Impact
National and international broadcast:
Nominated for the Richard Imison Best First Play Award 2000.
Radio CR: Eire (25 April 2012)

Widely reviewed in national press:
'Radio Choice' by Peter Bernard in *The Times* (20 June 2000 p. 29)
'Pick of the day' by Fiona Sturges in *The Independent Review* (20 June 2000 p. 17)
'Choice' by Gillian Reynolds in *The Daily Telegraph Television & Radio* (17 June 2000 p. 19)
'Radio Choice' by LO'C 'Recommended' in *Daily Mail Weekend* (17 June 2000 p. 49)
'Choice' by SG in *Radio Times* (20 June 2000 p. 126)
'Switch Picks' by SK in *Sunday Express Magazine* (18 June 2000)
'Radio choice' [unattributed] in *The Scotsman* (20 June 2000 p. 21)
'Radio choice' by Michael Hickling in *Yorkshire Post* (20 June 2000 p. 2)

'Radio' by SB in *The Observer Screen* (18 June 2000 p. 19):
'Rik Mayall is as frenetic as ever in Lloyd Peter's [*sic*] complex farce…pacey entertainment with some serious points to make about university cutbacks'.

'Today's Choice' [unattributed] in *Daily Express* (20 June 2000 p. 44):
'Lloyd Peters' comedy is rip-roaring, lightning-paced, over the top satirical fun'.

Creative and critical questions

The satire is characterised by an unconventionally heightened production and acting style. The exaggerated performances establish a 'hyper-real', non-naturalistic 'cartoon'-like tone reflecting the strengths of performers Rik Mayall, Helen Lederer and Phillip Glenister.

Note
Before Mayall's untimely death in June 2014, Lloyd Peters and Rik Mayall were in the process of writing a stage play adapted from *A Higher Education.*

2. *Brain of Brighouse*

Transmission date: BBC Radio 4, 22 February 2005.

Narrative outline
Comedy-drama. Danny Crossley, child prodigy and gameshow whizz-kid, becomes convinced that television gameshow host Mike Coster is his long lost dad. We follow Danny's painful journey of self-discovery as he finds out that General Knowledge is not the same as Real Knowledge. Answers are easy—the right questions, much harder.

Impact
National and international broadcast:
Radio CR: Belgium (4 September 2006)
Radio CR: Eire (29 September 2005)
Radio CR: Belgium (23 September 2005)
Radio CR: Eire (1 June 2005)

Creative and critical questions
The script is characterised by the inclusion of significant non-naturalistic performance and production elements which are atypical of other more mainstream Radio 4 productions. These include structural techniques providing flash-backs and flash-forwards to subvert linear narrative and fracture dialogue. Also it features the unconventional use of music and production techniques such as echo, distortion and displaced perspective to create expressionistic mood shifts.

3. *Four Steps to Heaven*

Transmission date: BBC Radio 4, 24 May 2006;
repeated on BBC Radio 4, 21 August 2007.

Narrative outline
Comedy-drama. Manchester 1984. New Romantic idealism has replaced the punk anger and Jewish trainee doctor Caroline Solomon has fallen in love with a 'gentile'. Can mild-mannered Chris Batty convert to Judaism and win the love of Caroline's Orthodox parents … all without being circumcised? Probably not, but as Chris discovers, there are more profound scars to endure than the ultimate threat to his manhood as family secrets and repressed emotions are unleashed when 'doing the right thing' is just not good enough.

Impact
National and international broadcast:
Radio CR: Belgium (29 September 2008)

Creative and critical questions and outputs
The script is written to allow a large degree of improvisation. This is to provide the production with an energised spontaneity. For example, the climactic argument between mother and daughter is improvised using the script as a foundation.

The following conference papers have explored this work:
Peters, L. 2009. 'Adapting adaptation theory: the journey from radio to stage of *Four Steps to Heaven*.' International Federation for Theatre Research conference (Lisbon, July). Paper accepted following peer review.

Peters, L. 2010. 'Adapting and adaptation, part 2: the journey from radio to stage and beyond'. International Federation for Theatre Research conference (Munich, July). Paper accepted following peer review.

4. *Goodbye Mr Gherkin* (Episode 1 of series *Take Away*)

Transmission date: BBC Radio 4, 15 November 2007.

Narrative outline
Comedy-drama**.** Opening episode of a series of linked comedy-dramas depicting the history of a fast food shop in Leeds. The chip shop is currently run by Poles. Ailing Uncle Victor's nephew's wife Jan can't stand Victor but she refuses to say why until matters come to a head.

Impact:
National and international broadcast:
Radio CR: Belgium (29 August 2008)
Radio CR: Eire (4 April 2008)

Press review:
'Afternoon Play' by Stephanie Billen in *Television The Observer* (11 November 2007 p. 21):
> The first of five lively dramas…In today's present day saga, *Goodbye Mr Gherkin,* a Polish family contemplates selling up after introducing unpopular Polish items on the chip shop's menu (Billen 2007: 21).

Creative and critical questions
The drama deals with issues surrounding immigration and prejudice specifically directed towards the in-coming Polish community. At its core the drama explores an assault within a family utilising time-shifts, fractured over-lapping dialogue, and soundscaping, interlaced with comedic episodes.

5. *Bell in the Ball*

Transmission date: BBC Radio 4, 25 June 2010;
repeated on BBC Radio 4, 14 June 2012.

Narrative outline

Comedy-drama. Danny was blinded in a fight on New Year's Eve 2008. He's angry about it—in fact he's angry about everything. So his long-suffering girlfriend suggests he joins a blind cricket team. It's surprisingly competitive and skilful. There's only one problem—Danny hates cricket.

Impact
National and International broadcast:
Radio Cable Retransmission (CR): Eire (17 January 2012)
Radio CR: Belgium (21 September 2011)

Play discussed on the *In Touch* programme (BBC Radio 4, June 8 2010).

Creative and critical questions and outputs
The drama deals with challenging issues concerning the perception of blindness in an aural environment. Difficult subject matter such as violence and disability are presented employing surreal and comedic techniques. The drama also utilises subverted linear narrative, fractured over-lapping dialogue, flashbacks and soundscaping, unusual in mainstream radio drama. The following conference papers have explored this work:

Peters, L. 2012. 'The representation of visual disability on screen, stage and in radio drama'. Salford Postgraduate Annual Research Conference (SPARC) (Salford, May).

Peters, L. 2012. 'The representation of visual disability on screen, stage and in radio drama' International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR), Disability and Performance Working Group panel (Santiago, Chile, July).
Paper accepted by invitation including peer review.

Note
The author is at present (2014) adapting the script for film and stage. Pilot scenes have already been filmed utilising distorted Point-of-View (POV) shots.

Peer Reviewed Article Details

6. Peters, Lloyd and Becker, Sue. 2010. 'Racism in comedy reappraised: Back to Little England?' *Comedy Studies*, 1:2, 191-200.

Co-authored (50%/50%) journal article which also reflects collaborative working and complimentary academic study, specifically contemporary comedy practice situated within a sociological theory context. The article formed the basis of a jointly re-written newspaper article by the authors published in The Sunday Sun (24 June 2007 p. 18) entitled 'It's not funny and not clever'.

7. Peters, Lloyd. 2013. 'The roots of alternative comedy? The alternative story of 20th Century Coyote and Eighties Comedy', *Comedy Studies* 4:1, 5–21.

This journal article details and contextualizes the naissance and development of 1988's 'alternative comedy' with special reference to the character-led comedy troupe 20th Century Coyote formed by the author in 1976.

RADIO RECORDING SCRIPTS

Peters, L. and Becker, S. (2010), 'Racism in comedy reappraised: Back to Little England?', *Comedy Studies* 1: 2, pp. 191–200, doi: 10.1386/cost.1.2.191_1

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Racism in Comedy Reappraised: Back to Little England?

ABSTRACT

The article was originally researched to consider issues of taste in the self-acclaimed 'New British Comedy' (circa 2003-09) exemplified by television, film, and stage shows of the previous decade, such as 'Little Britain', Sacha Baron Cohen's 'Borat…' and 'Mock the Week'. Considering the contemporary and continuing debate concerning the divide between satire and inappropriate racist offence, the article now considers and focuses on reappraising racism in comedy, with particular reference to the trends that emerged in the 'Little Britain' series of this era. As American commentators mark the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Harper Lee's 'To Kill a Mockingbird' (1989) through a critical reflection on racism in contemporary American culture, the authors believe it is timely to revisit the ways in which comedy reflects broader British attitudes towards race and racial stereotypes. A number of traditional social psychological theories will be used to explain why racist humour is still prevalent in Britain's multi cultural society. In particular the article will seek to illustrate the ways in which developments in contemporary comedy reflect the move from what is termed 'old fashioned racism' to what Gaertner & Dovidio (1986) term 'aversive racism'. The article will then develop the argument to illustrate the ways in which the interactional qualities which exemplify 'aversive racism' are manifested in the broader socio-political context as 'principled racism' which warrants racist humour through the rhetoric of 'race-blind' liberal principles (Sniderman, Brody & Tetlock, 1991.)

Early drafts of a paper on which this article was based were presented at: Leicester De Montfort University Symposium (2008), The International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR) Conference Political Performance Working Group in Stellenbosch, South Africa, (2007) and The Salford International Comedy Conference (2007).

KEYWORDS
television comedy
racism
aversive racism
principled racism
stigma
Little Britain
Matt Lucas
David Walliams

Little Britain reflects the cultural trend towards infantilism….less cutting-edge comedy than comedy conformism.

(Hume 2005)

CONTEXT

It is welcome, and hardly unsurprising, that with the passage of time a more objective analysis of the comedy of the previous decade can now commence. It is also evident that a move to 'safer', less 'edgy' broadcast comedy programming than was prevalent in the 'naughties' (2000-09) has occurred, especially at the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), provoked in great part by the Brand/Ross furore on Radio Two in October 2008, (when actor Andrew Sachs privacy was invaded on air) with the result that BBC programmes are now routinely reassessed for 'editorial risk'. This change of commissioning climate helps frame the debate when examining the merits and weaknesses of comedy that challenge the boundaries of 'taste and decency', exemplified by the television and stage show *Little Britain* (BBC 2003-09) written and performed by David Walliams and Matt Lucas.

The authors concluded, however, that the original rationale of the article concerning issues of taste in British comedy, needed to re-focus on an analysis of more universal and politically contemporary issues of social stigma and racism, and how they are/were reflected in popular comedy programming. This appears to be a much more urgent debate, especially considering the context where race and immigration issues were highlighted in the 2010 British General Election campaign debates and which now form part of the government's longer term policy agenda.

It is accepted that 'New British Comedy' (and especially *Little Britain*) of the previous decade found a large audience amongst young people in their late teens and early twenties. As developmental psychology tells us, this is a crucial transition period for many young people and a time when social, individual identity and group membership is 'up for grabs'. The use of 'aversive racism' in mainstream media is a potentially insidious development which warrants social psychological attention.

Many of the *Little Britain* characters such as: ugly bloke *Dudley* buying his Thai bride *Ting-Tong Macadangdang* from a magazine; *Vicky Pollard*, single mum and teenage delinquent; the Home Counties projectile vomiter; the over-sized, naked fighting women; the incontinent senior citizen who pees on the supermarket floor; carer *Lou* and the not-so-wheelchair bound *Andy*; *Dafydd* the only gay in the village – all had an enormous following amongst young people, evidenced by the character catchphrases being repeated parrot-fashion in many a school playground. As the show transferred from Radio 4 (in 2003), via BBC 2 and 3 to, eventually screen on BBC 1 (in 2005), the ethos, let alone the one-liners, of the programme entered the mainstream of British culture. The fact that *Little Britain* characters and catchphrases were appropriated by advertising agencies (for example, to promote The Nationwide building society in 2010), is not insignificant.

In terms of the comedy aesthetic of the last decade, there also appeared to be an increasing reaction to the norms of 'political correctness'. It had become fashionable to react against pressures to suppress prejudice and the writer/comedian's civil and moral duty to defend 'free speech'. For example, the campaign that comedian Rowan Atkinson launched in December 2004 against the government's Serious Organised Crime and Police bill that outlawed inciting religious hatred to protect faith groups, particularly Muslims, from attack.

Furthermore, the 'principled' stand against the agents of censorship was/is also seen as 'avant-garde' and 'pushing the envelope' as characterised by Sacha

Baron Cohen in the feature films *Brüno* (2009) portraying provocatively gay stereotypes and *Borat: Cultural Leanings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (2006) depicting provocatively anti-Semitic characters. A common anecdotal reading of these films is that the humour needs to be viewed within the context of post-modern irony - and not to recognise the 'knowing wink' is to be considered by logical extension, unknowing and therefore 'un-cool'. In other words, a member of the 'out-group'.

PSYCHOLOGY OF RACIST JOKES

In searching for a theoretical framework for this article, it became clear that traditional theories of racist humour take a predominantly interpersonal approach, focussing on the psychological mechanisms in play during the telling or hearing of racist joke (Billig 2005). Before moving on to analyse the wider social psychological mechanisms of racist comedy, a brief outline of the ways in which the racist joke works on an individual level will provide the foundation for understanding the ways in which broader society seemingly ameliorates the racist elements of 'New British Comedy'. The authors will later challenge the strategy where many contemporary comedians (knowingly or unknowingly) align themselves to accept the 'satire' rather than 'offence' argument when defending routines and sketches which contain offensive and racist material.

Key to understanding the 'racist joke' is that the stereotypes which inform this humour are based in contemporary attitudes towards particular groups in society. In order to 'get' a racist joke, stereotypes must be recognised and credible for the hearer. Ronald Desouza (1987) identifies that when a person finds jokes expressing either sexist or racist stereotype assumptions funny, they implicitly accept these stereotyped assumptions about the nature of the other. In order to illustrate this point; this article will present a joke using unfamiliar racial stereotypes. The joke below is taken from a body of racist humour common in Greece which plays on perceived attributes of ethnic minority Albanians.

> Question: How does the Albanian recipe for an omelette start?
> Answer: We steal 2 eggs.

The stereotype promoted is that of an Albanian who steals and, by implication that *all* Albanians steal. Without culturally informed knowledge of the target group or the prevailing social prejudices, the joke has little resonance. Georgios Antonopoulos (2004) confirms this by stating that, 'Racist jokes about migrants and crime make us laugh because we, as listeners, perceive the stereotype presented in the jokes to be real' (Antonopoulos 2004). So the only way to test this logic is to use different ethnicities and see if the 'joke' still works as an example of racist humour.

> Question: How does the English recipe for an omelette start?
> Answer: We steal 2 eggs.

It's not funny, at least for the Greeks, because the culturally available stereotype for the English are different to that for the Albanians and whilst this stereotype may include behaving in a thuggish and drunken manner, they do not include being inherently criminal. Antonopoulos's conclusion is that racist jokes about migrants and crime do not create racism in the Greek context but they reproduce and validate the already existing racism. They reinforce it and consequently, they become another

vehicle of racism in the Greek society. This begs the question: in the *Little Britain* '*Ting-Tong'* sketches, would the joke still work if the bride was French?

So, racist jokes are only effective if underlying racist attributions are socially acknowledged. Although the mechanism of the racist joke works by recognition of the racist stereotype, the enjoyment of the racist joke is not characterised by open recognition of a racist attitude on the part of the hearer. Freud describes telling jokes as an 'economy of pity' (Freud 1976: 295) - a socially accepted means of breaking taboos and a strategy to deflect anger. Zillman develops this theory as 'disparagement humour' (Zillman 1983) where the pleasure is derived from the expression of aggression against the target. Crucially, the joke-teller will not admit to themselves that this is the source of their pleasure. This aspect of self-deception on the part of the hearer is further developed through recognition of aggressive humour and teasing as part of socialization and developmental processes through which children are often guided by parental teasing and disciplining through aggressive and deprecatory humour (Billig 2001).

It may appear that 'old fashioned' racism is increasingly marginalised and individuals or groups identified as exemplifying this 'brand' of racism rightly condemned. In parallel to this socially acceptable distancing from groups like the British National Party and English Defence League, the production and popularity of broadcast comedies like *Little Britain* and *Mock the Week* (BBC 2005-present) would suggest that racist and offensive stereotypes are still prevalent in mainstream media and simply repackaged in a more manageable and acceptable form. In theoretical terms, this would support Gaertner and Dovidio's (1986: 124) assertion of a move towards 'aversive racism'. This form of racism is produced when the tension between expressed egalitarian attitudes of our post-modern society and pervasive negative stereotypes produces a conflict which leads to an unease and reticence in recognising these negative stereotypes as being overtly racist.

With reference to 'New British Comedy', whilst the stereotypes and racist assertions remain largely unchanged, they are reformulated and re-contextualised in a more palatable form which can be warranted through a variety of social discourses. In the arena of broadcast comedy, the most prevalent discourse drawn on to warrant the inclusion of racist jokes is the 'I'm being ironic' narrative. The key questions which drive this and other articles concerned with this trend in 'New British Comedy' is: haven't we talked this to death? Is there anything fresh to say about *Little Britain*? Does it matter?

The answer must take account of the social and political consequences of turning a 'race-blind' eye to the debate as to what constitutes the difference between racist humour and 'irony'. The consequence of ignoring the debate is to enable aversive racism to underpin not only continuing trends in British comedy, but also broader social and political policies. In order to outline the links between racist humour and social policy, it is worth considering the social function which humour serves.

We use humour to position ourselves socially for example, the use of 'in-jokes' which can strengthen group cohesiveness and a sense of shared belonging. However, for every 'in-group' there is an 'out-group' and as we align ourselves with particular groups, humour can be a powerful tool to distance and even marginalise other groups in society. Favourable 'in-group' comparisons can be reinforced by humour which enables downward social comparison to other more vulnerable or marginalised groups. Of particular interest is the way in which social groups justify

belief systems and attitudes which may appear to based on racist stereotypes. Humour can be a powerful tool to enable social cohesion or reinforce social hierarchies.

THE POLITICS OF RACIST COMEDY

Whilst the arguments over the justification of potentially offensive jokes have become academic currency in journals which span the humanities and social sciences, do these positions have any real social relevance? The social psychological impact of aversive racism can be seen as mainstream acceptance of shows like *Little Britain* and thereby provide sometimes unintended support for more overt and extreme positions. In particular the rationalized arguments given by many comedians for the content of controversial material can be seen to feed into a broader system of social beliefs which are used to justify and warrant a range of racist positions and behaviours.

The belief systems that underlie the 'justifiied' stigmatization responses fall into two kinds categories': 'Attributional approaches' and 'Hierarchical approaches' (Crandall 2003: 19-20). 'Justification' ideologies reinvent old fashioned racist beliefs that discriminatory treatment is natural, sensible and fair game and repackage these notions in more palatable terms (Crandall 2003: 127). 'Attributional approaches' follow the 'just world' belief; that is 'bad things happen to bad people', in that the locus of responsibility for the stigmatized person is internal. They are responsible for their own fate and deserve the consequences. An attributional approach can be seen in the *Little Britain 'Ting Tong' sketches*. David Walliams who plays the 'ugly bloke' in the *Ting-Tong* series of sketches, feels his character has received a raw deal from a Thai Bride catalogue. The argument would play out that, the ugly guy got what he deserved; by inference, *Ting-Tong* got what she deserved because she's a large, ugly Thai - which plays against traditional stereotypes that oriental women are petite. *Ting-Tong* is played by a man (Matt Lucas), which casts against the traditional stereotype of the Thai Ladyboy who is tall, thin, willowy and ultra-feminine.

The second category: 'hierarchical approaches' accept and even support, the notion that superior-inferior relationships are inevitable. This approach represents a modified form of Social Darwinism which espouses that the elite *and* the poor both deserve what's coming to them. The importance of recognising justification ideologies is that when used in combination with aversive racist practices, they provide a powerful rhetoric to enable the maintenance of the cultural hegemony and socio-political emphasis of maintaining the status quo. This in essence is the mechanism which enables 'principled racism', a concept we discuss in more detail later. In terms of the characterizations and justifications apparent in *Little Britain,* this form of racist comedy is constructed on a well established connection not based on race hate, but rather on a range of 'race-blind' political, social and cultural beliefs (Sniderman, Brody and Tetlock 1991)

The issues become more problematic when it can be argued powerfully that the moral and political health of a nation is signaled by its ability to not only laugh at one's self, but has the moral imperative to 'stigmatize' the actions of members of the executive and institutions of the state – specifically through political satirical characterizations, exemplified by *That Was the Week That Was* (BBC 1962-63), *Spitting Image* (Central Television 1984-1996) or more recently *The Thick of It* (BBC 2005-present). However, the authors contend that *Little Britain* as an apolitical show displays none of the moral authority to utilise attributional approaches.

According to Erving Goffman's classic 1963 definition, 'stigma' is defined as a characteristic that makes a person different and less desirable. Colloquial language helps to identify a stigmatised and/or non-stigmatised persons or groups, depending

on who uses the word and in which context, for example, the use of 'coloured', 'black' and the 'n-word'. The function of 'stigma' is a process of stereotyping – focusing on particular characteristic enabling social categorisation.
In this longstanding model, stigma is a sign/mark which designates the bearer as 'spoiled' and therefore valued less than 'normal' people. These 'marks' may be behavioural, physical, involve membership of a particular group or identify a moral failing (Goffman 1990: 45). Although the targets which we stigmatise may change over time and across cultures, stigma is a universal concept which functions to downgrade or marginalise particular elements or groups in society. It is therefore important to address the recent re-visibility of these stigmatized groups and stereotypes and their journey, via broadcast comedy, to mainstream cultural narratives and forms.

Throughout the course of this article, we have pointed to features of both characterization and justification which reflect aspects of 'aversive racism'. However, the acceptance of *Little Britain* onto mainstream broadcasting (from Radio 4 in 2003 to BBC 1 in 2005) in 'prime time' slots and the subsequent use of characters (for example in the 2010 advertising campaign by the Nationwide building society) would suggest that aversive racism with it's emphasis on the features of interpersonal interaction may not be a sufficiently broad framework in which to account for the potential socio-political impact of this trend. 'Principled racism' may be a more appropriate and sufficiently broad perspective to enable a consideration of the trajectory that the characterizations that originated from *Little Britain* have taken from cult 'satire' to becoming part of our current cultural fabric.

The dangers of such 'principled racism' are that they can lead to public policy preferences that can be described as anti-minority and racist. It can consolidate and justify the disparities between 'have' and 'have-nots' leading to attributions that create aggression and rejection in response. As Christian Crandall puts it, '[…] reactance can occur when people feel forced to suppress prejudice. Decreasing such persons' freedom to be prejudiced by enforcing social norms may lead to greater prejudice in response to this reactance' (Crandall 2003: 141)

Also 'principled racism' tends to endorse the status quo that can solidify existing hierarchical structures of social relations and institutions. Far from being 'cutting edge' or 'avant-garde', 'New British Comedy' tended to confirm the existing order and lends credence to the assertion that comedy is more a conservative medium of expression, with a big and little 'C', than radically innovative.

Another major danger of normalizing such 'race-blind' comedy on mainstream television is that it can help reflect, and possibly foster, a cultural environment that accepts the stigmatization of immigrants and makes acceptable prejudicial social and political policy. This may add to the general consensus that believes immigration controls are essential and which result in quasi-racist policies, such as the 'immigration cap', proposed by the coalition government in 2010. The danger becomes especially acute when broadcast comedy that particularly targets the next generation of the electorate, appear to confirm outdated stereotypes and prejudices. As Johann Hari puts it in his 2005 on-line article '*Little Britain, and casual racism'*:

> *Ting Tong* is nothing more than the pathetic flogging of another crass racist stereotype – yellow makeup, dodgy buck teeth and an inability to pronounce one's "r"s and you have a winning formula. It's interesting to note that while Spike Milligan's browning-up in *Curry and Chips* and *The Black and White*

> *Minstrel Show* have now been consigned forever to TV Hell (accompanied by lots of self-congratulatory back-slapping), *Little Britain* gets away with away with the exact same kind of thing. If you think I'm over-reacting, then consider this – is it any way likely that Matt Lucas would have instead dressed up as a Pakistani, put on a "goodness gracious me" accent, and done a sketch about arranged marriages?
>
> (Hari 2005)

Indeed, there would seem to be little 'casual' about the racism evident in *Little Britain* and subsequent 'New British Comedy'. The reinvention of racist humour as a lens to illuminate the tensions in our multi-cultural society is at best a risky practice. It is not without careful thought that the authors included their own anatomy of a racist joke. Does the notion that the racial stereotypes in the Greek omelette joke are not immediately culturally prevalent in Britain today, make this a less offensive form of racist humour? Whose perspective do we take when judging 'offensive' jokes – the teller; who may advocate that their intention was not to offend but to educate/ highlight social fractures, *or* the target?

ACCOUNTING FOR RACIST HUMOUR

As deceased stand-up Manchester comedian Bernard Manning often philosophized: everyone is a target. It's just that in Manning's case (and similarly in Middlesbrough stand-up Cubby Brown's stage set), minorities were/are always easier to hit. More recently, comedians have mobilised a range of accounting devices to justify racist humour which stem from the justification ideologies already outlined.

Mick Hume (2005) quotes David Walliams (writing about the characters in *The Times* newspaper) as saying, '"You want to spend time with them. You don't despise them. You're laughing with, not at them […..] We don't stereotype […..] We celebrate difference" '

This sounds not so much like quasi-New Labour spin of the time, but more defensive self-justification and, with specific reference to the *Ting-Tong* sketches, a form of 'racial microaggression' familiar in studies of aversive racism (Sue 2007). In common with the everyday microaggressions which deny race in order to justify racism; Walliams's rhetorical defense is undermined when the motivation for 'you' to spend time with the characters is unpacked. As the main force of *Little Britain* is to construct characters who are unaware of the ridiculous nature of their situation and appear as often grotesque exaggerations, then surely the motivation to spend time with them would be to continue to laugh 'at' rather than 'with' them.

As all we have to analyze here are the characters, the sketches and the quote, so using Billig's (2005) rhetorical approaches to humour we can deconstruct Walliams's justification above. In order to laugh 'with' someone, the performer needs audience interaction, so they also laugh. Furthermore in order to 'laugh with' someone, both parties must share the laughter and find humour in the situation. The dilemma here is that the characters are played seriously, they do not laugh at their situations - there are no 'off camera' asides to allude to a shared experience. The 'joke' is visible only to the audience, not to the characters and therefore we laugh *at* rather than *with* the characters.

For comedian Frankie Boyle, the controversial *Mock the Week* panelist, the rhetorical strategy used to account for racist humour is to focus attention on the skill and artifice of the joke-teller. In an interview with Stephen Dalton (2008) of *The Times* newspaper, Boyle says that the trick is smuggling taboo subjects inside an

elegantly structured joke, and insists that, '[…]gallows humour, soldier humour has always been with us[…] if it's got a subtlety to it, they almost give you points for that' (Dalton 2008). Boyle's rhetoric is to celebrate the sophistication of the joke itself as an allowance for including racist stereotypes; this justification reflects a hierarchical approach with the artistry and skill of the joke-teller used to warrant underlying racist assertions.

Boyle also aligns his potentially offensive humour with 'gallows humour' (Thorson 1997). The key difference between 'racist' and 'gallows humour' is that the social practice of 'gallows humour' has particular contexts and boundaries and it is rarely practiced and articulated to outsiders. For those communities of practice who have a strong tradition of 'gallows humour', these are in-group jokes which are shared by members in order to enable shared experience between group members (Sullivan 2000) and relieve stress in times of extreme trauma (Scott 2007). When these jokes are occasionally told to outsiders, they are used as an invitation to enable non-members to share intimate experiences and to ease tension when recounting potentially distressing narratives. Examples of 'gallows humour' to non-group members includes death jokes told by terminal cancer sufferers (Chapman 1997) and incontinence humour by epilepsy sufferers (Kilinc, Becker and Campbell 2008)

Is it possible, therefore, that Bernard Manning was operating more honestly than many of the 'new' comedians of the last decade? Many 'new' comedians sought to distance themselves from the old fashioned joke telling of Bernard Manning whilst presenting character depictions of minorities which were cloaked in a 'Middle-England' uncritical acceptance of what was trendy and cool. We're back to 'aversive racism'.

One of the final scenes (in Part 5) of the *Ting Tong* series of sketches features *Ting-Tong* and her waiter brother evicting *Dudley* from his council flat after they have turned the residence into a Thai restaurant. As *Dudley* walks dejectedly into the distance, the viewer is left with an uncomfortable sense of the consequences of inviting the ungenerous, foreign invader into Britain, which is not a million miles away from the extreme right-wing sentiment of 'give them an inch, and they'll bring their family, take your house and your jobs'.

As we enter what the government call 'an age of austerity', the consequence of writer-performers reinforcing a climate of 'principled racism', knowingly or unknowingly, could be profound. This is especially true when government expenditure cuts in public services begin to bite – minorities ('out-groups') historically bear the brunt of frustrations when majorities ('in-groups') feel threatened or deprived. In conclusion, it would appear important that contemporary comedy writers and performers are aware of the political and social impact of their material in order to avoid sleep-walking into providing the mass 'entertainment' back-drop that legitimises 'aversive' or 'principled racism'.

It was this consequence that writer Johnny Speight recognised following the responses to the later series of his immensely popular sit-com '*Til Death Do Us Part* (BBC 1966-75) when he observed an alarming number of viewers identified rather too sympathetically with his central character – the racist bigot *Alf Garnet*. In Speight's opinion, too many were laughing *with Garnet,* not *at Garnet* as intended. As Michael Billig puts it in his conclusion to *Humour and hatred: The Racist jokes of the Ku Klux Klan* (2001): 'Far from saying to themselves that it is only a joke, they can assert that this is not just a joke' …and then none of us will be laughing.

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The roots of alternative comedy? – the alternative story of 20th Century Coyote and Eighties Comedy

Abstract

There have been many articles but too few rigorous critiques detailing the naissance and flowering of alternative comedy – a rather loose and undefined term for the brand of 'non-racist, non-sexist' comedy of the 1980s. The descriptions that do exist of the formation, growth and continued influence of this ill-defined 'genre' tend to be rather uncritical and more often than not, factually incorrect. The articles are often London-centric and rarely identify the origins of one of the more important roots of this comedy phenomenon to a jazz club in Manchester. For it was Band on the Wall in the run down northern quarter of Manchester in1976 that first played host to one of the key inspirations for character-led improvised sketch comedy. This brand of performance, which also tends to be under-discussed, transferred to the comedy clubs in the late 1970s and 1980s, including the original Soho Comedy Store and The Comic Strip. Formed by

the author Lloyd Peters in March 1976 whilst studying B.A. Drama at Manchester University, his improvisatory character-led comedy troupe 20th Century Coyote was to become the resident company at The Band on the Wall. Peters recruited fellow thespian student Rik Mayall principally because they shared the same off-beat humour – anarchic slapstick mixed with a large dose of Monty Python's Flying Circus. *Two further Manchester University drama students were press-ganged from the year below and rather late in the day (October1976) Adrian Edmondson to appear in Coyote's first improv-based comedy entitled* Dead Funny *(1976). Six other shows followed before an Edinburgh Fringe Festival spin-off. The 40-minute live shows were self-contained narratives based on recognized comedy templates but worked, or more correctly warped, by improvisation and then re-improvised in performance. The shows were often loud, crude and grotesque. This article details the importance of the group, its techniques and the lasting influence of character-led sketch and ' imrov' comedy that shaped a distinctive brand of 'alternative comedy' in the 1970s and 1980s and that would soon dominate the comedy mainstream.*

Keywords

20th Century Coyote

alternative comedy

character-led comedy

television comedy

stand-up

Band on the Wall

Manchester University Drama Department

Context

It is welcome and unsurprising that with the passage of time a more objective analysis of the 1980's comedy scene can now commence. The term alternative comedy had been claimed at its most basic – allegedly defined by comic stand-ups Malcolm Hardee and Tony Allen – as an *alternative* to the mainstream live comedy. But there is no denying that it is a broad, over-used (and often mis-used) term that covered a multiplicity of performers and performance styles that flowered in the early 1980s.

Against the backdrop of Margaret Thatcher's administrations (1979–1983 and 1983–1987) and the discordant soundtrack of rebellious punk music, comedy performers as diverse as Keith Allen, Alexei Sayle, Rik Mayall, John Hegley and French and Saunders enjoyed burgeoning success. Most would eventually be appropriated, assimilated (and inevitably re-packaged) into the mainstream of television with shows such as *The Young Ones* (BBC 1982–1984), *French and Saunders* (BBC 1987–2005) and *Saturday Live* (Channel 4 1985–1987). This 'new wave' brand – it was too varied to be called a movement – coincided with the birth of a new *alternative* television broadcaster, namely Channel 4 who was established to commission 'minority' interest programming (commenced 2 November 1982). This was a perfect springboard to harness the talents of Peter Richardson who ran The Comic Strip (1980–1981) (at the Boulevard Theatre in the

Raymond Revue bar, London) together with other defecting comedians (from the more aggressive Comedy Store) in The Comic Strip Presents series (1982–present) and whose *Five Go Mad in Dorset* was screened on the new Channel's launch day.

What is often conveniently over-looked is that the majority of the performers on the alternative comedy scene at this time – and it tended at first to be principally a London-centric circuit – delivered quite evidently non-political content. There were notable exceptions such as Alexei Sayle (the first and regular Master of Ceremonies of The Comedy Store), Tony Allen, Jim Barclay and Pauline Melville who, probably due to their radical fringe theatre roots, could be described as confronting political issues directly. Attacks on Thatcher were a staple component of their stand-up sets. Sayle, with his Stalinist parental influence, also often turned his ire on The Labour Party's inability to effectively confront the Thatcherite agenda.

However, it must be said that most performers of this time were quite conservative (small 'c') in content and form. Stylistically the majority of the stand-up comedians adopted the traditional cabaret/music hall and heightened persona modus operandi. However the traditional set-up, development and punch-line structure was often devoid of the 'killer' pay-off – outrage, passion and rage rather than neat funny 'closure' was more the order of the day. An audience wasn't there to please – but to confront. This was the 'new' world of challenge and attitude in which, notably Keith Allen would hurl back the Comedy Store ashtrays at an unappreciative audience from whence they came. However, the most outraged and radical of these performers still appeared to confirm the notion that despite

the left-wing stance, comedy remains a ‘conservative’ art-form in that material must register with what is already accepted in an audience member in order to trigger a response.

As Simon Critchley identifies in *On Humour (Thinking in Action)* (2002), a joke-teller and audience agree a:

> …tacit social contract… namely some agreement about the world in which we find ourselves as the implicit background to the joke. There has to be some tacit consensus or implicit shared understanding as to what constitutes joking ‘for us’ as to which linguistic or visual routines are recognized as joking….Joking is a game that players only play successfully when they both understand and follow the rules. (2002: 4)

Others might characterize this phenomenon as simply preaching, (or rather joshing), to the converted.

There was a second sub-section of *alternative* performers of the time, such as Randolph the Remarkable (one big belly and one small plastic bowl of water), John Hegley (off-beat poet with Glasses) and Julian Clary (promoted as the Joan Collins Fan Club – a duologue between Julian and Fanny the dog) that subverted the stand-up form. These

were in the main curiosity, unusual acts that were deemed *alternative* by the nature they were not the ordinary or mainstream fare one would expect to see on a comedy line-up.

The third distinctive sub-section that I would identify at this time, and which I would argue, were the most visibly influential of the *alternative* performers (in that they were appropriated more readily by television), were the character comedians. This was not stand-up or novelty performance – these were often improvised (or based on *improv*), character-led short sketches exemplified by the likes of The Oblivion Boys (Steve Frost and Mark Arden), French and Saunders and the surreal Vic Reeves and Bob Mortimer.[1] One of the most successful duos of the comedy clubs of this time, The Dangerous Brothers (Rik Mayall and Ade Edmondson) developed these characters and skills from their time with 20th Century Coyote at Manchester University only four years earlier. It is due to the major impact of this character-led form on alternative comedy and its continuing influence today (on what I like to call post-alternative comedy), that the roots of this comedy are the principal focus of attention in this article.

Birth of Coyote

It is undeniable that the cultural and political context of the time are essential to understanding the roots of 1980s UK character-based comedy. However, only when an analysis of the personnel involved placed in a specific geographic location can the full picture emerge. The continual comedic interchange of the five members that made up 20th Century Coyote: Lloyd Peters, Rik Mayall, Mike Redfern, Mark Dewison and Ade

Edmondson – played a major part in developing comedy character routines, which were to feature later in their shows. Indeed, the relationships and '*lazzi*' (comedy business) they established were akin to a continual long-form improvisation – highly amusing to those involved and quite tiresome to those who were not, including their lecturers. However, it is self-evident that most of the comedy groups through the ages owe their success to an intimate understanding of each performer's strengths and weaknesses. It is where a group's timing is honed and developed to a stage where the unknowing spectator would describe the comedy as 'intuitive' and 'instinctive – the performer knows that spontaneous improvisation takes a lot of rehearsal.

It is important to recognize and credit the roots of Coyote's character-based sketch comedy. Leaving the influence of The Marx Brothers to one side for another article (concerning film to television to theatre influence), radio and television antecedents such as *The Goons* (BBC 1951–1960), Spike Milligan's *Q* series (BBC 1969–1982), Michael Bentine's *It's a Square World* (BBC, 1960–1964), *Do Not Adjust Your Set* (ITV 1967–1969) and most importantly for the baby-boom generation, *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (BBC 1969–1974) were all pre-cursors that created the fractured, non-narrative, off-beat sketch shows of 20th Century Coyote.

What directly impacted upon the students in 1975 were the plays and playwrights introduced as part of their drama course. Major influences were the Commedia dell'Arte stock character types, the surrealist/dadist classics such as *Ubu Roi* (Jarry), the Absurdists such as Ionesco (*Rhinocerous*) and most importantly the Restoration Comedy of Manner

playwrights, especially Moliere – *Tartuffe, The Misanthrope* and Ben Jonson's Comedy of Humours (*Volpone*). Also Grotowski and Artaud had a bearing especially concerning concepts of physical performance connected with the *Theatre of Cruelty*. Significantly, it is no coincidence that the first major show in which Peters, Mayall and Edmonson appeared was the 1976 first year production of Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*. Some of the performances were open-air, which provided invaluable voice-projection training in readiness for the noisy pub environments they were to experience at Band on the Wall. The larger than life characters, needing projection and exaggerated delivery to communicate (especially outside), was the performance template employed for all 20th Century Coyote shows.

More than that, what the students stole from Comedy of Humours/Manners' texts was the opportunity to present bawdy characters enmeshed in scurrilous plots. What was undeniably attractive about Restoration plays was that they presented flamboyantly rude and crude characters often declaiming sexual innuendo and offensive dialogue. All of human life was here to be mercilessly plundered – pompous twits, feral low-life, the devious, the sex-starved, the deceivers, the pretenders. Mistaken identity and deception, disguise and reveal, shock and horror were the staple plot devices. The plays presented a delicious opportunity to ridicule the pretentious and the pompous whether they were from upper or working class. These characters and narratives formed the basis of every 20th Century Coyote play to follow and beyond – all performed from the privileged status of a comfortable middle class drama student.

The intentions of social correction through satire that the Restoration playwrights espoused were, in truth, lofty aims not prioritized by the Coyote troupe, although desires to introduce more satirical wit were discussed (and dismissed) at subsequent company meetings. These extra-curricula shows served as a release from the more formal academic rigours of university life, such as they were, and served as an opportunity for showing off increasingly skilful comedy techniques, which was their passion. However, the Restoration themes that presented social unease and injustice appeared attractively contemporary given the political climate of the Thatcher administration. To the politically leftish-leaning students, there were a large number of scandals to expose and a multitude of rich people to satirize in the mid-1970s and it appeared entirely appropriate to resurrect a sixteenth-/seventeenth-century genre in all its grotesque excessiveness.

As an undergraduate studying Drama (B.A. Hons) at Manchester University (from 1975 to 1978), the group's founder Peters met his first recruit fellow drama student Rik Mayall when both housed in the Manchester University Hall's of Residence at Owen's Park, Fallowfield. What united the pair was their love of the absurd, the surreal, the irreverent and the cheap burgers from the so-called *Arm-pit* – the nearby Canadian Charcoal Pit take-away. Also they both had a penchant for silly voices and like many of their generation, quoted large sections of Monty Python sketches, which were seen as de rigeur 'coolness' in the mid-1970s. The Manchester Drama course also encouraged students like Peters and Mayall to experiment off-curricula, as impromptu performances were staged every week – especially Monday evenings – at the famous Stephen Joseph Studio – the ramshackle converted church that stood at the heart of the more formal, polished

Manchester University (Owens) campus. Many of the unsung troupes of this time engaging in bizarre and risqué absurdism at the Stephen Joseph Studio certainly had an influence on the new intake. It has to be said that the artistic atmosphere of the University Drama Department at this time (1975–1978) was indeed rich with innovative talent and certainly contributed to a general atmosphere of invincibility and experiment – a 'we can do anything' attitude. This was not the usual empty student arrogance – many of these particular graduating students subsequently did make a name for themselves in the performance and media industries.[2]

In its own way, the scruffy studio (and the drama students that inhabited it) stood as a metaphorical two-fingers to the straight-laced academics that surrounded it. The quite unmerited superiority complex that the Drama students felt was exemplified by the fact that they were allowed to call their lecturers by their first names – not a privilege open to many others studying at Owens. Perhaps it was also the chip-on-the-shoulder envy that they were not at Oxford or Cambridge. Those interested in comedy saw their rough, crude experiments at the Studio as an antidote to the Cambridge Footlights (1883–present) and Establishment Club (1961–1964) 'cleverness', relying more on vague parodies or grotesque caricature rather than well-constructed sharp political or social satire.

However, it was not until their second year when Mayall and Peters moved from Owens Park Halls (with two mutual friends from the English course) into Lime Cottage, Wilmslow Road in increasingly fashionable East Didsbury, that the seeds of Coyote were

sown. Myth had it that Lime Cottage once housed the servants who attended the larger, grander house next door. The Cottage entered student mythology as HQ for anarchic meetings and wild parties. Two of Rik Mayall's former school pals from the King's School, Worcester – Mike Redfern and Mark Dewison – who had just enrolled on the first year also to study Drama at Manchester University were frequent visitors to the Cottage. As they were of like comedic mind, they were also enlisted to join the embryonic comedy band that was to become 20th Century Coyote – a suitably appropriate bad pun named by Hollywood film fan Peters – mainly because he possessed the 20th Century Fox theme music on vinyl. The music became the signature tune that opened and closed all Coyote shows. Needless to say, copyright was not cleared.

The final member of the troupe, fellow second year Drama student Ade Edmondson, was recruited rather late in the day (October1976) mainly due to a suspicion that his humour was a little too refined for the group's anarchy – especially as his favourite comedy inspiration at that time was alleged to be Tom Stoppard. However, as Rik Mayall put it in an interview with Martyn Palmer (1994), Ade had to be included because, 'he had a red corduroy jacket, with strategic rips in it, with little John Lennon glasses and really ripped trousers. He was totally cool as far as I was concerned – and he had a motorbike'.

A section of an episode of the documentary series *Comedy Map* (BBC 2007) hosted by Peters and Redfern traced The Cottage as the inspiration for *The Young Ones* (BBC 1982–1984). Anarchic parties, un-washed dishes and motorcycles being driven up

staircases all figured in the lives of the residents of The Cottage and future television storylines. As Mike Redfern put it:

> It really was living in filth, living in squalor, living a party life and fitting studying around it. (BBC 2007)

As Peters concurred:

> We didn't know how to look after ourselves. It was the first time we were away. (BBC 2007)

Crucially, the BBC programme omitted the central information that 20th Century Coyote was created there.[3] Peters registered the name on 1 January 1977 (as a theatrical agency in error) at The Cottage address some three months after the group first performed at Band on the Wall. Presumably it still is registered there even though The Cottage and adjacent mansion were demolished in the 1990s to make way for a nursing care home.

Coyote uncaged

The respected, if slightly dilapidated, jazz venue Band on the Wall, Swan Street was home to Manchester University's semi-professional undergraduate theatre troupes (such as Snoh Fun and Jester) since March 1976. The new owners, local jazz musician Steve Morris and his business partner Frank Cusick had bought the old George and Dragon pub in 1975. They had the fore-sight to offer the space to all musical genres not just jazz and

rode the new and post-punk wave with great effect – The Buzzcocks and The Fall played there. They also had the foresight to encourage the growing student population through the doors in any way possible, including lunchtime drama.

It should be stressed that the idea of visiting a pub or club to watch theatre, not to mention comedy, was a rather rare, radical and imaginative alternative-use concept in the mid-seventies. The marketing of comedy as the 'new rock and roll' was an unthinkably distant notion. However, the novelty of theatre activity in a pub was now worthy of press attention. As journalist Alan Sanders put it under the subheading 'Fringe Benefits' in the Manchester arts paper *New Manchester Review* (a fanzine and listings magazine which was the precursor for the now defunct *City Life*):

> Three cheerful Mancunians told me that they had thought their scene was 'playing 501 at darts, playing cards'. They had never seen anything like this before, but would now 'go out of their way to see it'. As one put it, 'I count myself as working-class, and theatre always seemed something middle-class and not for me. I didn't know what to expect, but it was good; I enjoyed it'.
>
> (Sanders 1976)

This reinforces an argument not always clearly delineated with respect to northern-based comedy in the 1970s – that the performers, offering non-elitist, unstructured free entertainment, had stumbled unwittingly upon the Zeitgeist of the time – an alternative type of 'punk' entertainment. It was surely no coincidence that on 4 June 1976, The Sex

Pistols played Manchester's Lesser Free Trade Hall in what came to be regarded as one of the most influential rock shows ever. Something new was in the air and those in the 'arts' vicinity could not help being infected by the fallout.

> A full-time union official said 'I think this is giving us the indication to go to the theatre. I would never have gone, you know, but the kind of plays which are put on here (Band on the Wall) are giving people the indication that there is something better in life than television, and things of that nature… what we have seen here has generated an interest'.
>
> (Sanders 1976)

Described on the hand-drawn posters adorning the Band on the Wall club walls and windows as Lunchtime Theatre, the Coyote shows certainly had their roots in cabaret and vaudeville. The Coyote press release announced that:

> Band on the Wall, Swan Street, already established as one of the leading jazz centres in the North, has for some time now been experimenting with lunchtime pub drama…..the actors work from unscripted scenarios especially formulated for pub audiences. (Press release 20th Century Coyote, 5 November 1976)

The shows *were* specially formulated, as detailed below. However, with no sense of destiny, the Band on the Wall was also seen by the Coyote troupe as a possible route to apply for a much-valued Equity card (The Actors Union). This valuable commodity

recognized the performer as a professional and allowed the holder to work on stage and television. Equity was a 'closed-shop' union at the time and membership required four professional contracted engagements. It was common knowledge that being described as a Variety artist was an easier route to gain an Equity card as it had less onerous membership restrictions. This could explain why many shows at this time, including those at Band on the Wall, were described as 'Cabaret' or 'Variety' performances. However this quest for 'The Card' was to prove fruitless for the Manchester University drama pub performers – the Thursday, Friday and Saturday lunchtime shows were not officially contracted. Unsurprisingly, handing round a bucket at the end of the performance was not recognized by Equity as paid professional work.

As resident company at Band on the Wall since October 1976, a new Coyote show was initially devised every fortnight and staged Thursday, Friday and Saturday lunchtimes. This was a punishing schedule for those expected to write essays and attend the odd lecture and the time-scale was eventually amended so as to produce a new show every three weeks. This was reason enough to 'employ' a stage manager and props gatherer – Joanne Bolt (daughter of screenwriter Robert Bolt of *Man for All Seasons* (1966) fame) – although 'employ' meant no remuneration, just the kudos of involvement in the grand comedy experiment.

What was unusual at the time about 20th Century Coyote is that it combined *all* the elements described above – the surreal, the absurd, bawdy Restoration farce, fractured TV sit-com with *long-form* theatre improvisation – a rather inflated academic term

simply meaning – 'making it up as you go along'.[4] The Coyote shows were amalgams of all these forms – often improvised round embryonic plots and recognized character personas, but usually, with an absurd twist. The 'genre' was closest to farce and slapstick[5] – unsurprising when Peters and Mayall were both enthusiastic advocates of Laurel and Hardy. Its appealing energy was due to the likelihood that anything could happen during the 40-minute shows – and frequently did. If things went wrong, this was seen as strength not weakness.

Crucial to the success of the group was that the members of Coyote possessed complimentary and at the same time antagonistic performance styles that helped develop and cement stock comedy personas and which in turn suggested narrative. Mayall often played the immature spoilt child – sex-crazed and frustrated – constantly sparring with Peters – loud, surreal and crazy – an homage to the Marx Brothers; Redfern often played the sardonic voice of ill-reason; Dewison the dark, brooding and sinister interloper; Edmondson – weirdly white collar and off-beat – the bank manager with a grass skirt. It was a glorious character mix that helped create imaginative, original comedy conflicts.

For example, in their second show *The Church Bizarre – a Fete worse than Death* (1976) the farcical plot of multiple tragedies at a church fete saw the arrival of a non-naturalistic, expressionist Death figure, costumed in full black cloak with accompanying scythe. Whilst displaying a rather pathetic *Danse Macabre*, Mayall as Death sarcastically complains that he has more important things to attend to than a bunch of country yokels who had drunk too much cider – there were plane crashes to organize. This juxtaposition

of heightened farce with stylized personification more at home in a mediaeval mummers play was an imaginative juxtaposition of styles. The visitation of Death was 'borrowed' from the Ingmar Bergman film *The Seventh Seal* (1957), which was performed as a play-text by the Drama students in their first year. The Death character was resurrected years later, Mayall playing the role in *Maurice Dobbs Makes a Movie* (Peters 1988) and *Wishbone* (1989) films written and directed by Peters. It was also used as a character and plot device in episodes of *The Young Ones* and *Bottom* (BBC 1991-1995) television series.

Dead Funny

The first official Coyote show *Dead Funny* was performed Thursday, Friday and Saturday lunchtime 14–16 October 1976 to approximately 35–40 people per show – each performance lasting approximately 40 minutes. Rehearsals, including full dress rehearsals, were usually arranged in the evenings following lectures and all Coyote members attended to shape and develop the scene-by-scene skeleton template originally drafted by Peters and Mayall at The Cottage.

There was no external director guidance - this was collaborative, collective play making. Characters were allocated and extra scenes added (from thirteen scenes in Draft One to 26 scenes in Draft Two) all by mutual agreement. When the troupe rehearsed briefly in the space, extra business was added, for example: using the supporting columns at Band on the Wall to help the many surprise reveals. At that time (before refurbishment) the

sightlines to view the stage were rather poor but the columns were used by Coyote to mask characters and help delineate an entrance/exit point – a type of Brechtian wing area.

The original, hand-scrawled scene-by-scene templates for *Dead Funny* still exist and provide a useful insight into how the seemingly improvised comedy was carefully structured. In brief, the narrative presents a farcical tale about a murderous doctor on the run, mistaken identity, curious workmen and a policeman investigating a dead body at a party that isn't dead at all. Below I summarize the lined A4 scene-by-scene template sheet (Draft Two), headed on the first page by the character note that: 'everyone stupid'. I have attempted to reproduce the original pagination, margin notes, quotation marks, (incorrect) scene numbering, underscoring and higher case lettering – an indication of key dialogue and the importance of the main action – what academics might describe as Inciting Incident and major Turning Points.

1 20th century Fox (twice.) <u>Mark</u>

2 Rick + Mark enter – Discuss Party – Don't see Body

Describe Dr Jeckyll-Hyde Knackers in detail from paper.

EXIT BOTH.

3 APPEAR – SPEECH – Perfect woman – FIT ON certain words – <u>TITS</u> - have a fit on. TWITCH –innate insanity – "I'M SANE as the next man."

5 ABOUT TO CARVE when they enter – pushed away from body.

*TITS + rhyming words

Who are you talking to?

6 Pretend to be postman. –

EXIT + leave.

7 Mark + Rick – talking about party – Broom business // Drugs – //What did at party Girls.

8 Discover body by Rick sitting on it. Panicky. More excited. – get a drink from the bar – Gin and tonic.

9 Silly things to do – "Hula Kula" More panic.

10 Knock – think its Police – "Drugs squad" Draped.
Vice squad". tablecloth.

just a mention. I'm the Dr.

11 . Im "Table Mender" – "Have you a Table"
with a meat cleaver "man eating bicycle pump"

12 "Excuse us a moment – I (Lloyd) approach the body

* about to cut her bits off

What's wrong with her – pull back the cover

13 Get rid of me * She's sleeping Fit – lips

14 What to do? – coffee table – Ring – The number –
Removals 22222
"They can't come"

15 Knock Removals Man – Garden Shears.

"Doesn't he look like Doctor" to audience

Pantomime – 'Oh no he doesn't" like Table Mike Mender".

Oh No – "I'm French" – "J'habite" he's French.

16 In a huddle Mark + Rick – just about to cut tits – Table falls.

- what are you doing? – I rush out.

EXIT.

17 Stand up as statue by the chimney –

put her in the chimney and burn her.

You look like postman.
I'm not – more authorative] Enter Knock I burst
Weapon sabre.

in – What are you doing? – Dancing Instructor with limp.

Dancing Instructor. I'll give her a dance – she's too tired

Looks ill – I'll look at her I'm a doctor – prove it – Marlene Dietrich –

He's German we can trust him – "maybe she is ill?"

Go get some hot water and towels:

What's the matter it worked. I reenter
early send
them off
again.

18 I'm alone – another bit of raid –

19 knife raised renter

Mark + Rick – shriek

20 I pop Tit – shriek

19 Turn round see Mark, Rick – we all shriek.

We're all shrieking; Mike sits up

20 We turn round I shriek – Then Mark + Rick shriek.

21 When we find out not a woman – shriek together

22 When policeman we shriek

23 Mike's speech – ball + chain.

24 Final speech 1 Who you were – who many years on trail

What you doing how you find out "Hot tip" *

Arrests me

25 Then – pleased applause congratulating police – list of charges

Turn to Mark + Rick > 1 not reporting a dead

body – not alone a policeman/woman – not dead at all.

list of charges lot of them. Impersonating "Let alone a table mender"

26 Moral of this story. 20th century Fox Music

interrupts

The moral of this story A stiff in time saves Crime

Interruption

20th century Fox "Then play it"

again cmon then.

Even on a cursory reading, it is evident that this earliest of alternative comedy shows could not be described as 'non-sexist, non-racist'. The pantomimic scenario is deliberately crude and rude and owes more to a Ray Cooney sex farce or Carry On film than ground-breaking comedy. The reception to the show was mixed – and continued to divide the audience. Indeed, at the time there were vocal critics – some of them Manchester University students – who found the humour crass and infantile compared to their more lofty, well-made dramas that had preceded Coyote's residency at Band on the Wall. One current student at the time described the material as 'garbage' although

admitted to still having enjoyed it. A pejorative criticism, that became the common currency of back-handed insult for this form of character comedy years later, was that the humour was 'wacky and zany' – the latter word interestingly derived from late sixteenth-century Italian word *zani* which was the stock name of servants acting as clowns in Commedia dell'Arte. Probably it was a more appropriate observation than the critics intended.

However, the Coyote troupe knew in their bones this was the start of something big, as Rik Mayall said after the Saturday performance on 16 October 1976.

> It's great 'cos we can at last show our potential, show what we've got.

What was difficult to see at the time was the prevailing cultural context of mid-1970s Manchester. First, *Dead Funny* was a product of its age – more deliberately 'punk' rebellion and rudely anti-establishment than politically correct polemic. Also, and notwithstanding 1960s' trail-blazers in this area [6] it was amongst the first of its breed to present non-elitist (anti-elitist), free, comedy entertainment in a pub – certainly in the north-west. It celebrated being intellectually lightweight and easy to digest with a pint. Also the humour was more self-deprecating in reality than comes across on the page – all the characters were male, infantile losers, incapable of establishing serious relationships. This is a predictable consequence considering the absence of any female acting members of Coyote.

The template of the male loser inadequate was to become a staple stock character type in virtually every sit-com then and now. Without making too many profound connections, it perhaps mirrors the well-documented sociological and psychological phenomena surrounding the increased insecurity of men's status in British society.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that this form of character-led TV comedy continued to attract criticism specifically its tendency to be male dominated and overtly sexist. Indeed Alexei Sayle – a regular character in *The Young Ones* – was a vocal critic of the banality of this type of 'brainless bimbo' comedy. (Allegedly Sayle used the term to describe *Bottom*.) This was an example of an increasing antagonism in the 1980s between the politically driven stand-ups at The Comedy Store and London club circuit, and those delivering physical character-based comedy. This is probably due the fact that the latter didn't comfortably fit the 'non-sexist, non-racist' template. It could also be argued that because of the multitude of celebrated male performers at the time (*French and Saunders* excepted) that it fuelled, however tendentiously, the divisive 'women aren't funny' controversy. Indeed the criticisms increased as the comedy transferred to the small screen, for example, the banning of *The Dangerous Brothers* sketch *Kinky Sex* on *Saturday Live* and the plethora of disparagement aimed at the short-lived *Filthy Rich and Catflap* series (BBC 1987). Relatively contemporary performers of this form of comedy such as *The League of Gentleman* (BBC 1999-2002) continue to face similar scrutiny. As Gamze Toylan identifies in her article on *The League of Gentlemen* in which she quotes Linda Badley (1995):

> …'postmodern' texts depict the 'postmodern sexual terror', which 'has become part of a much larger anxiety about gender, identity, morality, power, and loss of control, [...]'
>
> (Toylan 2012: 47)

I would argue that those anxieties are not solely confined to the postmodern era, but were also evident in the pre/early postmodern era of the mid-1970s. Indeed the consequence of these anxieties was that the tension between the 'non-sexist, non-racist' purists (or those imposters hiding behind that title) and the character-led non-purists certainly increased when television found it easier to assimilate the latter rather than the former.

Coyote rampant

Following the success of *Dead Funny* – over £10 collected in the bucket was a success not to be sniffed at by impoverished students – 20th Century Coyote produced six more alternative Cabaret shows at The Band on the Wall over a seven-month period. These were:

The Church Bizarre – a Fete worse than Death

Who Is Dick Treacle?

Phantom of the Cabaret

The Tpying Error

The Anniversary Show

Ron and the King's nubile daughter

Day of the Deckchair – (written and performed by Peters and Ade Edmondson) was a spin-off show presented at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in August 1978).

All the shows presented a similar formula of grotesque and instantly recognizable character types, farcical plots and improvised dialogue guided by pre-constructed scene-by-scene structures. Certainly a cult following was created and the troupe were offered extra bookings (a gig in Guide Bridge, Ashton Under-Lyne). Accounts compiled by Peters reveal that after expenses (props, costumes publicity posters, photographs and even 'acting wages' (£5.00) the 'Balance of Expenses Sheet No. 4' revealed that on 19 March 1977, The 20th Century Coyote company had net assets of £20.37.

In the final analysis, Coyote created its own curious comedy sub-genre – a complex and original mix of extended sketches, improvisatory routines, direct audience address, monologues – a grotesque, slapstick sit-com for the stage. The shows were intentionally 'naughty' and risqué, embarrassing even – a deliberate antidote to the academic rigors of the well-made plays the students were obliged to study. Perhaps it is more than coincidence that Gamze Toylan describes *The League of Gentlemen*'s 'genre hybridity' as:

> …. complex, with its roots in the English comedy tradition that blends the grotesque and absurd……music hall and variety theatre, as well as specific creators like Monty Python. The comedy style, distinct and dark in its own right, interweaves the pleasure of breaking taboos, the formation of oppositions such as

> exclusion and inclusion, and the usage of comedy of social embarrassment and bodily wit, which in turn combines the feelings of pleasure and discomfort.
>
> (Toylan 2012: 47)

I would argue that precisely the same amalgam of styles and influences characterized all the Coyote shows – a direct antecedent of the *Gentlemen*. The shows as a whole certainly served as a template for many characters developed on subsequent stage and sit-coms in the 1980s, including Rik (the 'c' now dropped) in *The Young Ones* (BBC2 1982–1984). As the BBC comedy website (2012) puts it:

> It was the style and the characterization of *The Young Ones*, rather than its stories, which was entirely new. Never before had violence of such degree, squalor, physical foulness, blood, sex and death, all been used as such a regular part of a flagship comedy programme.
>
> (Anon 2012)

But of course it had all been seen on-stage at The Band on the Wall in every one of the Coyote shows some five years before the first *Young Ones* episode (in 1982).

Coyote migrates south

20th Century Coyote never formally disbanded – in fact the name was used as by Mayall and Edmondson at the Comic Strip as late as 1981. But as Mayall and Peters entered their

final year at university in September 1977 the commitment to performing together as the original five-some waned. Their decision to leave Lime Cottage – that incubator of anarchic ideas – and look for alternative accommodation in Manchester effectively meant that the central energy source of the troupe had dissipated. The Cottage – the catalyst location for constructing all the skeleton plots – had been passed to the next generation of Drama students. Concurrently, the location that spawned the atmosphere of rebellion – The Band on the Wall – was also looking to move on and concentrate more on lunchtime music than 'cabaret' theatre.

However, Coyote members continued to work together in a range of productions either as part of their drama course curricula – for example, *The Government Inspector* and *A Winters Tale* (Peters and Mayall were the clowns) – or as part of extra-curricula shows such as Edward Bond's *The Sea*.[7] Following graduation in 1978, Peters, Mayall and Edmondson moved to London to seek work as actors. Their search happily coincided with the opening of The Comedy Store (in 1979) and Comic Strip (in 1980–1981) comedy clubs. Rik created anarchist poet Wick who professed his love for Theatre and Vanessa Redgrave, which featured on *Boom Boom… Out Go the Lights* (1980–1981). He also created Brummie investigator and philosopher Kevin Turvey, which was picked up by the sketch show *A Kick Up the Eighties* (BBC 1981–1984). He partnered Edmondson to form the loser perverts, *The Dangerous Brothers* – a stage act that appeared in the TV late-night sketch show *Saturday Live* (Channel 4). The characters and titles of some of their sketches provide the evidence of the Coyote legacy, for example, *Torture* and *How to Get Off with A Lady*. One of the final sketches entitled *Kinky Sex* was a pure Coyote

derivative banned by Channel 4 for being 'too sexy and too violent'. Adolescent, slapstick and anarchic were some of the kinder comments the material courted – exactly the same criticisms that 20th Century Coyote had attracted some four years previously.

In between television drama work (including a Mike Leigh film *Home Sweet Home* (Leigh 1982) and the iconic *Boys from the Blackstuff* (BBC 1982), Peters teamed up with another ex-Manchester graduate and school friend Gary Brown to form comedy duo Foot and Mouth. They were regulars at The Comedy Store playing, amongst other characters, pompous aristos Anton and Giles – two twits who would have been well at home in any Coyote show. Brown and Peters also ran a comedy club in Covent Garden's Lamb and Flag pub (in Rose Street) for a short season. They hosted the best of the new comedians at the time including early bookings for Clive Anderson, Paul Merton and Rik Mayall's anarchist poet Wick.

Mark Dewison and Mike Redfern also moved to London to pursue acting careers and both received work as theatre performers. However, in more recent times they subsequently both re-trained, Dewison as a counselor and Redfern as a management training consultant.

Mayall and Edmondson collaborated together on a 16mm film directed and produced by Peters – a non-naturalistic adaptation of The Velvet Underground's off-beat verse song 'The Gift' (1980) featuring Edmondson as *shmuck* Waldo and Mayall as groping boyfriend Bill. It was scheduled to be screened on BBC2 in the 1980s but was pulled due

to it being considered too ‘punk’ by the BBC executive producer. Rik Mayall also appeared in a film entitled *Le Chat in the Loo* (1980) written and directed by Peters, a parody of Bunuel/Dali’s surreal masterpiece *Un Chien Andalou* (1929).

Peters and Mayall last worked together for the recording of the Radio 4 play *A Higher Education* (2000) written by Peters in which Mayall appeared as the corrupt Professor Don Cruikshank. This off-beat satire, that also features Helen Lederer and Philip Glenister, owes much to the Coyote style combining heightened character types with a farcical, pantomimic performance style. Also like Coyote shows of the past, and unusually for radio drama, some scenes were improvised ‘live’ when recorded. The play was nominated for a Richard Imison First play award and has been repeated many times most recently on Radio 4 Extra on 5 December 2012. Plans for Peters and Mayall to collaborate and write a contemporary stage version of the play have been discussed as recently as February 2013. It hardly needs emphasizing, if more proof were needed, of the longevity of the Coyote legacy.

Coyote – the final howl

Given the plethora of talent from an unusually gifted intake of Manchester drama students in the mid-1970s, it was perhaps inevitable that 20th Century Coyote was to be somewhat overlooked.

And indeed, there will be critics who argue that Coyote was a rather inconsequential footnote in the great comedy naissance of the 1980s and 1990s. This article attempts to evidence the contrary view and to argue that the tremors of influence from this short-lived company troupe were quite profound and continue to vibrate even today. For instance, a direct line can be traced from the character-led innovations of 20th Century Coyote, through *The Dangerous Brothers,* and then to *The Young Ones,* which instilled an anti-mainstream slapstick into the mainstream. Their male-dominated excesses paved the way for the 'new-laddism' comedy of the late 1980s and 1990s (exemplified by David Baddiel and Frank Skinner), through TV series such as *Men Behaving Badly* (BBC 1992-1995) and beyond to the *Little Britain* (BBC 2003–2006) series of character-led grotesques. One personality trait that appears to unite many of the characterizations in these shows is the frustrated, male loser – rude, crude and unsuccessful at any personal relationship. This certainly can be traced back to the scenarios of *Dead Funny* – and Restoration comedy and Commedia dell' Arte before that.

Significantly, the Coyote experience also adds weight to the contested theory that live theatre is indeed the primary engine that fuels innovation – a factory of ideas – that television eventually appropriates. The fact of the matter is that the majority of the comedy sketch shows and sit-coms of the 1980s and 1990s had their roots in theatrical experimentation. The invention of the characters and the development of slick timed routines could only come about from months on the club and pub circuit – television has no facility for lengthy rehearsal. This was as true for *The League of Gentlemen* as it was for 20th Century Coyote and beyond. And it was not the stand-ups alone who were

leading the charge of the alternative comedy brand in the 1980s – the character-led comedians, as exemplified by the 20th Century Coyote boys, were certainly in the avant-garde.

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Lloyd Peters has lectured at the University of Salford since 1992. In that time he became a Senior Lecturer, Head of Performance, Programme Leader of (M.A.) Fiction Film Production and (M.A.) TV Documentary and an internationally published researcher in Political Performance. Peters has been a professional actor, director and writer for 35 years and has received many television and radio broadcast commissions. He has worked with a number of the United Kingdom's leading practitioners, including film director Mike Leigh, Ken Russell, Alan Bleasedale and Michael Wearing. He founded the 'alternative comedy' company 20th Century Coyote (with Rik Mayall) whilst studying Drama at Manchester University (1975–1978).

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NOTES

[1] Vic and Bob were mostly resident at The Tunnel Palladium, The Mitre, Deptford, London (1984–1989).

[2] Alumni from the Manchester University 1974–1979 intake include: Tom Watt (sports broadcaster), Gary Brown (BBC Radio producer), Ben Elton (writer and performer), Paul Bradley (actor), Maggie Philbin (TV presenter), Shelagh Stevenson (playwright), Tony Clark (theatre director), Mathew Evans (TV director).

[3] What the edit of the BBC programme also intentionally overlooked was that Mike Redfern did not live in The Cottage until he ‘inherited’ the property in 1978 after Mayall and Peters moved out.

[4] Often long-form improvisation is traditionally initiated by a word, phrase or character or as the *Harold* form is defined: punctuated by games. (see Chin 2009: 4)

[5] In a recent face-to-face interview with the author (11 February 2013), Rik Mayall insisted that Coyote shows and all subsequent derivatives (*Dangerous Brothers, Young Ones, Bottom*) had little to do with 'slapstick', which suggested staged buffoonery. Mayall prefers the physicalization to be viewed as 'real violence' because that was a more accurate description. Looking at scrawled notes Peters made following a company meeting (30 November 1976), there were suggestions from some members to 'cut down on the slapstick' in favour of more wit and satire. There is no evidence that subsequent shows reflected this proposal. A suggestion to bring in women and an (outside) director was also rejected as 'superfluous' (Peters' notes 1976).

[6] Such as *CAST* (Cartoon Archetypal Slogan Theatre) a left-wing, variety-based agit-prop theatre company toured art centres, pubs and small theatres in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

[7] Directed by Maggie Philbin soon presenter of *Multi-Coloured Swapshop* (BBC 1976–1982) fame, helmed by Noel Edmonds.