

Richard Foreman: Comedy inside out

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Marie-Claire Pasquier

“Remember. This text is — as it were — inside out.
That is, its presentation — to in a sense —
make it clear — inside out.
Because when you see the inside outside —
the inside is clear, right?”

Richard Foreman, *Rhoda in Potatoland*¹

Why bring Richard Foreman’s Ontological-Hysteric Theatre into an issue of *Modern Drama* which centers on modern comedy? My immediate response and bold answer will be: because he is a great comic writer. Does that mean that his plays are “comedies” really, that they can be made to fit into the established canon? One could argue that, when they were first produced, neither *La Cantatrice chauve* nor *En Attendant Godot*, to take two “classic” examples, qualified as “comedies.” Yet both plays came to be recognized unmistakably as transgressive, innovative forms of *modern* comedy. This is one problem faced by the innovative artist: either the audience rejects him, failing to see what sense he makes, or it is only too

¹ In Richard Foreman, *Plays and Manifestos*, ed. Kate Davy (New York, 1976), p. 207.

willing to tailor him into an acceptable shape so that he can figure in the honors list of the great artists of all times. And the critic faces the well-known dilemma of wanting to discover or herald originality and, in doing so, contributing to its becoming accepted, labeled, consumable. Susan Sontag analyzed “Camp” effectively, but by exposing its strategies, she also hastened the end of “Camp” as a collective mode of resistance.

One thing is certain: Foreman himself would resist being fitted into any established genre. He has repeatedly admitted that he has used some of the conventions of traditional theatre, including boulevard comedy, but that he distorted them for his own purposes. Which purposes? He has presented these over the years in his own rambling fashion (to include digressions is one of his favorite methods) in the series of “Ontological-Hysteric Manifestos” which have accompanied his theatrical productions?² Basically, they center on the altering and intensification of perception — an ambitious, a very earnest focus, The Manifestos draw on Wittgenstein, on phenomenology, on theories about antimatter. These “obsessive theoretical outpours,” as Foreman calls them (quoted in *Théâtre/public*, Fall 1981), can be very stimulating, illuminating, they also have a tendency to be dogmatic. Fortunately, Foreman admits that he does not mind *contradicting* these notes in his performed productions: contradiction has become his *modus vivendi*. Over the years, he has had to establish himself both as an avant-garde artist (rejecting accepted codes, inventing new modes of communication, disrupting habits and conventions), and as a serious, consistent professional. Being consistently disruptive is in itself a contradiction. Foreman has had to fight those spectators and critics who walk out on what they consider leg-pulling (and there *is* actually a lot of literal, physical “leg-pulling” in Foreman’s theatre). He has countered them by emitting the cuttlefish ink of theory which acts as a screen, blinding us to the fact that his creative talent, imagination, invention, are just (or *also*) FUNNY: yes, plain funny.

² The published “Ontological-Hysteric Manifestos” are:

“Ontological-Hysteric Manifesto 1,” April, 1972

“Ontological-Hysteric Manifesto IE,” July, 1974

“Ontological-Hysteric Manifesto IE,” June, 1975

These three Manifestos are published in Richard Foreman, *Plays and Manifestos*, together with eight plays of the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre. This book will be referred to, henceforth, as *RF PM*.

Before we analyze whether this theatre is mostly parody, or burlesque, or farce, or punk, slapstick or “lewdicrous” humor, a sequence of gags, puns, grotesque fantasies, or pure clownery, horseplay, we ought to dispense with the screen: leg-pulling....³

At first sight, then, Foreman seems to steer clear of the realm of comedy. It is a generally accepted notion that comedy assumes some kind of complicity with the audience. The famous Charles Addams cartoon in which Mona Lisa alone chuckles while everyone else in the audience looks frightened or aghast does not offer a feasible pattern for audience response to comedy. ⁴ If comedy is successful, the whole audience must share the same appreciation of it — whether appreciation takes the form of laughter, cheering, or any other collective reaction. Foreman, however, has the instinct — and the theoretical intent — to attack his audience rather than please it (in this, even though he may deny it, he owes a debt to the Happenings of the sixties). He wants to be “uncongenial,” as he has declared: “The artistic experience *must* be an ordeal to be undergone. The rhythms *must* be in a certain way difficult and uncongenial.” ⁵ Yet this attitude and the techniques which effected it have altered slightly over the years; shock effect can be effective only over a limited period of time before defences and immunities develop. One of Foreman’s early devices was noise-aggression which can go a long way, as a result of technological progress, toward assaulting the captive audience in an auditorium. As Kate Davy remembers them, these noises — some of them specified in the texts, others added during rehearsals — included “foghorns, thuds, pings, boings, glass shattering, drumrolls, bells, whistles and screams.” ⁶ They created a shattering experience indeed, real pandemonium, with a “live” effect due partly to the presence of actors on stage, partly to the presence of the *deus ex machina* imperviously, imperiously sitting at his desk. This high-decibel deluge has receded, but one can nevertheless argue that even in recent

³ The corpus of Richard Foreman’s theatre is still open. His latest productions to date are *Penguin Touquet* (Public Theatre, New York) and *Café-Amérique* (Théâtre de Gennevilliers, France, 1981). There has clearly been an evolution in Foreman’s style and dramatic techniques since 1968, which was the date of *Angelface*, his first production. Still, some of his main obsessions have remained visible from play to play. An overall unity derives from the fact that the “characters” remain basically the same. And I shall choose here, for convenience’s sake, to focus on the unity rather than on the differences. Ruby Cohn would probably agree with this strategy, as she said in *New American Dramatists, 1960-1980* (New York, 1982): “The corpus of Foreman’s Ontological/Hysterical Theatre is so full of repetitions that it is hard to see any single piece as a whole” (p. 161).

⁴ Perhaps I misremember; perhaps she displays her own inimitable, enigmatic smile while all the others laugh. But the point remains the same.

⁵ “Ontological-Hysterical Manifesto I,” in *RF PM*, p. 74.

⁶ Kate Davy, Introduction, *RF PM*, p. xv.

productions some of the pornographic stage images — grotesque postures of nude bodies, bloated exhibitionist phalluses — are visually aggressive.

Foreman contends that he does not want a happy audience, because a happy audience relaxes and is half-asleep in its own “at-homeness” (as he phrases it in *RF PM*, p. 148). This is how he expresses the point in his second manifesto:

The test: when the audience says “wow” and they sink into wide grins of awe, or laughter, or tears, or in general have wide-eyed, child-like delighted faces (so loved by the hidden camera which shows people enjoying a show) —

WARNING!

When they frown, and wrinkle the brow, and stroke the chin and say “hummmm... curious...

THEN

They're perhaps awake, and working at seeing and noticing how things go and don't go together.⁷

Foreman does not want the audience to sit back enjoying it all; he wants it to stroke a hypothetical collective chin, uttering a dubious collective “hummmm...” “[W]orking at seeing” — that is a key line with him. Seeing is no sinecure, but hard work, if it is done conscientiously, if it involves *noticing* as opposed to *taking it in*, as in television viewing. Most of the creative American avant-garde have been intent upon doing what soap operas on television cannot do, upon not doing what they can do: stirring up emotions, for instance. The avant-garde (including Foreman) want to alter consciousness, not to “pander to the masses.”

Where do these considerations leave us as far as comedy is concerned? I assume that they lead us directly to comedy, because comedy — whatever its strategies, whatever its devices — is about awakening us. And comedy can be rough; for that matter, people *expect* to be tossed about. What Peter Brook calls “the rough theatre” — making it clear that he thinks this kind of theatre will always “save the day” — is not necessarily pleasant; more often than not it bullies the audience. “Rough theatre” may be gross, rowdy, in bad taste, it may indulge in horseplay that is always too loud or too obvious or crude or lewd or all of these; and it distorts, exaggerates, equivocates. In doing all this it is — and means to be — a very efficient

⁷ “Ontological-Hysteric Manifesto II,” in *RF PM*, pp. 142-143.

form of protest against hierarchy, against order, against the established rules. It participates in the carnival tradition, *in vino veritas* and for today the truth goes unpunished. It sets the fool against the king; it allows the revenge of the little man. We shall see that some of Foreman's theatre moves in this direction, establishing this kind of relationship with the audience.

If comedy manages to shake us out of complacency, out of lethargic assent to whatever is imposed upon us in brief, if it has a "moral" purpose — that function exists because comedy makes us aware of our basic predicament. What is our basic predicament? At its most fundamental, it is our mortality. As Tennessee Williams once put it, we are prisoners inside our own skins; and we wish that we were different, that we had wings and we could fly. Foreman is concerned with our basic predicament. In connection with it, he displays "the comic imagination." His stage images project beyond the theatre and uncover basic needs, and anguish. One of the recurrent situations in his plays is based on *curiosity*, an impatience with our bodily limitations: if we could see what is inside; if there could be two or three of us instead of just one;⁸ if we could reach farther and farther away; if we could be *invisible*. The recurring concern with invisibility is part of Foreman's interest in the process of seeing. The larger theme is in part what the stage is about: seeing and being seen. But Foreman treats the theme quite subtly, complicates it: not only seeing but seeing oneself seeing. He calls this concept "duo-consciousness":

To be a proper SPECTATOR is to be in two places at once.

- 1) Seeing where it is (the art)
- 2) Seeing where you are (watching).⁹

With Foreman, the stage intensifies the process of vision; it is an experimental field in which — thanks to close-ups, accelerations, repetitions or freezes — the spectators have an opportunity to reflect not only on what they are watching, but on the very process of watching. And of course watching is never very far from *peeping* — looking at what is supposed to take

⁸ This we find, as is well known, in Ionesco's theatre. But it occurs before him, in Gertrude Stein's. In *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* (1938) — which Foreman is to direct in Paris in the fall of 1982 (at the Théâtre de Gennevilliers) — Stein expresses the same concern by giving her heroine four names instead of one: Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel.

⁹ "Ontological-Hysteric Manifesto II," p. 143.

place privately (the outsider gaining an inside view). The theatre is a situation which has something to do with voyeurism on the one hand, exhibitionism on the other. Most of Foreman's comedy is sexual comedy: the fantasies men have about women (women as "body-things" as well as "mind-things" [standard phrases in Foreman's theatre]); and the games women (or rather little girls in the shapes of women) play, exploring their own bodies and the bodies of other women/little girls, or playing up to the males' fantasies. Foreman's imagination is "cosmicomic," to borrow Italo Calvino's wonderful expression, but in his case the cosmos is the human body: it is an object of infinite wonder, and there is no end to the exploring of it. It is also a source of dread, because we never know what might come out of it. In *Hotel China* (also written HcOhTiEnLa, 1971), for example, Karl I says:

Jesus, look what's coming out of my mouth.

(Pause.)

A hammer.

(Pause.)

A plate.

(Pause. Knocks begin.)

A pane of glass.

(Pause.)

A pair of glasses.

(Pause; knocks get louder.)

A chair. (in *RF PM*, p. 90)

Our bodies are as alien to us as the vast remote world —nothing is to be taken for granted. We must keep exploring our own bodies as well as those of others, which might prove sources of enlightenment or delight, or ritualistically fend off the threat. So we play: we indulge in sadistic grabbing, pulling, twisting — all different ways of experimenting with resistance, with pliancy, with flexibility. Foreman's version of this unflagging curiosity is almost scientifically oriented; he experiments by means which include the burlesque (incongruity of situations, topsy-turviness) and the grotesque (sexually incongruous behavior or innuendoes).

In *Classical Therapy or A Week Under the Influence...* (1973) — understandably, *anything* can happen during a week under the influence — Hannah, Rhoda and Eleanor are in one big bed. More precisely:

Curtain opens on a distorted perspective Italian miniature set, exterior with wall on one side, and large bed on other in which lie, under the covers, HANNAH, RHODA and ELEANOR. (in RF PM, p. 157)

The distortion in perspective is important, adding to the unreality, to the atmosphere of fantasy, and deflecting the crudeness. In the *big* bed there are *three* girls: the bed appears big, like that of parents when children are left to play in it, and the girls are three, not two, the number making the situation less ambiguous (or less obvious), more playful. Hannah speaks out loud — as what we see, or think we see, takes on its full meaning only if it is *stated verbally* at the same time. Besides, we can only guess that the girls are “*under the covers.*” In fact, there is another mimed scene taking place at the same time on another part of the stage, attracting part of the spectators’ attention. Within this context, Hannah says: “– My God, she’s grabbing my left breast in her right hand.” Then Rhoda speaks in a symmetrical sentence pattern, as if dutifully performing a grammatical drill: “My God, she’s putting her right foot directly into my cunt.” (The shock effect of this sentence is enhanced — or deflected, or made amusing — by the word “directly,” as if this modifier represented the amazing part of the comment.) As expected, Eleanor makes a statement next, “overlapping” so that we are not totally sure of what we hear and the effect is one of “accelerated grimace,” or almost of simultaneous action: “– My God, she’s putting her thumb into my ass like a rubber hose.”

What follows immediately makes the whole scene float in midair like the bubble of a comic strip (and this is just as outrageous, as provocative as some comic strips are meant to be), setting it in a realm between fact and fantasy. Are we even sure of what we heard? Are they even sure of what happened? A legend reads: “IT IS SO EASY TO FORGET EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENS”; and the next legend after that: “IT COULDN'T BE NOTICED IF IT WAS HIDDEN BY THE BLANKET.” In between the girls have said:

ELEANOR I did not dream it did I.

RHODA and HANNAH What.

(Pause.)

We all dreamed it together, beautiful lady. (pp. 157-158)

The scene is given poetic quality somewhat comparable perhaps to passages in Genet, a writer who can glorify the crudest sexual situations and transform them into poetry by suspending them, turning them into magical moments, visions.

“Getting into bodies” (see quotation from *Sophia* below), managing to see the insides of things — this process is literal, as well as metaphorical, in Foreman’s theatre. So Hannah in *Total Recall* (1970) asks: “Can I see into his head by looking through his ear[?]” (in *RF PM*, p. 56). A caption written by Foreman himself under a photograph taken from (the unpublished) *Le Livre des Splendeurs* (Paris, 1976) reads: “Rhoda looks into her pocket book and Hannah looks into Rhoda.” This is exactly what they are doing, on all fours, in a grotesque Bosch-like posture which stops short, if not quite of being obscene, at least of being disgusting, because the two women “freeze” in the attitude and overdo it, overperform, as if they were playing charades. In *Sophia = (Wisdom)* Part 3: The Cliffs (1972), Sophia says: “Hey, Ben, you can get into her body easier than you can get into my body” (in *RF PM*, p. 115). Foreman images the body repeatedly as a container, like a pocket book or a basket. A little earlier in the same play, Sophia questions: “What do you have in that basket, Rhoda[?]”; and Rhoda, in a summer dress and with a picnic basket, answers in an unemotional tone: “Something to hit you with.” Unimpressed, Sophia asks if she can look and insists: “I thought I could look” (pp. 114-115). Unending curiosity.

Looking inside can denote an attitude of distrust and appropriation — as in looking inside a sandwich before daring to bite into it (as if what is inside might very well bite back). It may be linked to the instinct of devouring, the primal desire to eat up one’s enemy in order to capture and incorporate his strength. We find in Foreman signs of that impulse: not only of the desire to open up things and bodies, to tear them apart, to see what is inside, but also of the desire to eat up the object of sexual desire (the reassuring same or the threatening other) together with the fear of being eaten. Writing about Gertrude Stein, for example, Foreman declares: “It’s clear I think that Stein’s work wants to devour me, eat me up”; he also speaks about the possible ways “to enter the body of her work.”¹⁰ These metaphors come to him naturally. In his theatrical productions, he plays with the idea, notably in *Rhoda in Potatoland (Her Fall-Starts)* 1976):

¹⁰ To be published in *Théâtre/public*, Théâtre de Gennevilliers, Fall 1982.

RHODA I wasn't on a dinner plate.

HANNAH Oh yes. Ben was eating you. (in *RF PM*, p. 209)

Objects — innocent objects, almost any object — can stand for the human body, or a part of the human body, or (specifically) a sexual organ, or a sexual function. An enormous shoe on stage, a basket — these are current symbols, But Foreman plays the game of charging unexpected objects with erotic value. The insinuations or innuendoes result from grammatical abstraction. In *Classical Therapy*, for example, lamps and a violin receive this treatment. The first hint is given by Ben: “Do you mean the desire for the lamp [?]” Then Ben and Karl have this brief exchange:

BEN I think your violin is in a dangerous position.

KARL I think one of your two lamps is in a very dangerous position. (p. 162)

There is no doubt as to the actuality of the objects — violin, lamps — on the stage, the violin being held by strings horizontally in space. Still, in the dialogue they represent obscure but suggestive metaphors. Moreover, the objects in Foreman's theatre are often attached to the body in incongruous positions:

HANNAH, RHODA and ELEANOR enter as music begins. Then they put their heads on the pillows, keeping their legs straight and supporting their bodies with straight arms, their behinds sticking up in the air. In that position they begin circling, their heads acting as a pivot on the pillow. (p. 163)

In this way Foreman emphasizes that in human beings (or in animals) the limbs, or the physical parts, are attached to the body in all kinds of incongruous ways: sticking out, hanging loose, or glued to the spot, fragile and offensive. He does not discard fetishism, he toys with it in a parodical manner.

Clearly, the relationship between body and mind is not the clear-cut opposition to which we are used. Foreman employs the terms “body-things” and “mind-things” to suggest other, more subtle connections. In *Total Recall*, the following exchange takes place between Leo and Ben:

LEO All I can think about is her body.

BEN All I can think about is her mind.

LEO (*Pause.*) I don't believe it.

BEN What.

LEO (*Pause.*) I think Ben is thinking about her body.

BEN (*Pause.*) It's not like an ordinary body. (*Pause.*)

It's like a mind.

LEO What.

BEN (*Pause.*) Her body (*Pause.*) I think her whole body is thinking and I can hear it.

LEO What.

BEN (*Pause.*) Thinking.

LEO Her body is emanating but it's not thinking. (in *RF PM*, p. 45)

At another point in the play, Ben says: "I might find out that what went on inside Hannah's head was her body" (p. 54).

In *Rhoda in Potatoland*, Foreman explores systematically the metaphorical possibilities of the vegetable-object called potato. Enormous shapeless potatoes appear on stage, framed — out of any plausible context — in windows, doors, etc. The play is a "potato comedy": it is clearly one of Foreman's plays that have comic dimension, exploring the comic identifications that the object and the term permit. A potato is familiar, homely, edible. These big, shapeless, baggy, brownish nutritive objects are out of place anywhere but underground or on the dinner plate; therefore they are funny on stage. And since this is a man's fantasy, they are naturally identified with women. When a man identifies a woman with a cow (cf. the Marx Brothers), the comedy that results has several dimensions: the cow is a motherly figure, milk-giving; it is also a rather stupid-looking creature, too big, with an awesome voice. In contrast, the potato, an inert vegetable, allows a man to fantasy a totally passive, unresponsive woman. Not sentient, this object has no apertures, no differentiation of organs; but its tumescence, or its "turgescence" as Foreman puts it, gives it physicality.

The title ironically reminds us of the fact that the potato is an unglorified wonder ("Potatoland," after "'Wonderland'"). We have seen that any object can convey sexual innuendoes: here "baked potato" does the trick. In a short effective scene, the Waiter, head in door, says: "Your potatoes are on the fire." After a pause, he adds: "Excuse me, I mean here they come." A potato comes to the front door, and the legend reads: "'The potato can't enter because the door isn't big enough.'" The simultaneous actions involve a book called "Erotic

photographs of the preceding century” and a mirror. Then the Waiter speaks again: “Here’s your baked potato.” He exits, and the legend reads: ““You realize, when he’s said — here’s your baked potato — he’s said everything.”” The audience is then addressed directly by Max, who presents a potato to it as he says: “Here’s your baked potato” (p. 214). Here Foreman’s theatre is pure emphasis, pure derision, without any decipherable content, making us realize that some of our more intense moments — fear or joy — have little to do with their content. The effect is analogous to that of music.

The investigation of potatoes in this play at times takes the form of a parody of ethnographic research. The Voice declares:

Potatoes have no special feelings about physical proximity to other potatoes.

On the other hand, potatoes — as far as we know — have no literature or art of any kind to which they sublimate powerful sexual energies.

(Pause.)

Potatoes endure. They are eaten
But they still, endure.

(Lights fade out.) (p. 214)

The tone is that of the pompous lecturer, and the genteel ferocity of the ending - “They are eaten/But they still, endure” — is comic in an ironical sense because of the endless series of victims we can think of in history who have been praised for their endurance by those who made them suffer. But Foreman plays with language as well as convention in this text. *Rhoda in Potatoland* is one of the plays in which he systematically uses puns, plays with words, shifts from one meaning to the next. In one passage, for example, he creates the reversal of expectations associated with traditional comedy. Max has just said or sung:

I made this choice for Rhoda.

“Come to bed

Come to bed

Come to bed

Come to bed.”

Rhoda then declares: “They always say come to bed when what they mean is...? (p. 217). Another exchange plays with the various possible meanings of the verbs to feel and to feel like. Rhoda claims: “I feel like a potato”; then Agatha: “I feel like a potato”; stage indication: “They feel each other” — as if this sense of feeling could be communicated through touch. With the pun, it can — as Agatha concludes: “Oh Rhoda, you feel like a potato”; and Rhoda responds: “You smell like a potato and you even/(*Both lick.*)/taste like a potato.” Then the impersonal Voice takes over: “Would she think that Agatha smelled and tasted like a potato if she herself didn’t feel like a potato [?]” (pp. 213-214).

This brand of Absurdist humor is close to that of Ionesco, but there is no mechanical imitation here. Instead, the characters reveal a shared concern with the basic problem of identity, as well as the insecurity bred by never being sure which body belongs to whom. What does a man do when he realizes that there are two of him (Walter I and Walter II in *Angelface*), or rather when he discovers that he has two heads? All he can say is:

Don't step on me.

(Max stops. Pause, Walter II shouts.)

Don't step on my two heads, Max!

...Step on my arms if you have to, but don't step on my hands. On the other hand, step on my legs if you must, huh? Step on my knees if you must, huh? Listen, step on my legs but don't blow a lotta that smoke in my direction. (in RF PM, p. 21)

“[I]f you must”: there is some logic in the behavior of others toward us, we can rest assured; even if that behavior appears mysterious or harmful, there must be a law somewhere that is being obeyed, a secret prescription. Since Kafka, this sense of everything being submitted to some remote mysterious power has been one of the basic assumptions of the “Theatre of the Absurd.” Why does Foreman follow in the same tracks? I think he does because (as I suggested at the beginning) he is the consistent (or persistent) disruptive artist: Prometheus and the vulture; the Danaides and the broken cistern. The little man who is trodden upon repeatedly can only decide never to stop complaining, arguing, begging — not, stop doing this, but, if you *must* do it, then, at least...

In *Angelface*, one character says: “My body is imitating me” (p. 18). How are we to construe such a statement? How alien can a body become? How hard can it try to become the self? A double fear is expressed: that of being separate (from one’s own self, from others); and that of not being separate, an individual distinct from any other. In the same play, Rhoda awkwardly extends a foot and starts to count these appendages, while Weinstein does the same: “I have a foot. ... Two feet.” Weinstein advises: “Count feet, divide by two”; and Rhoda says, laughing: “Keep my feet separate from Mr. Weinstein’s feet” (pp. 14-15). In effect, parts of one’s own body might be parts of somebody else’s, or vice versa. So Ben describes Sophia in *Total Recall*: “I think she’s inside my head. (*Pause.*) Wrong. I think she’s a second head. The second head belongs to me even though it’s invisible”; and, “She has a whole body inside a part of my body” (p. 45). The body seldom seems to act or react as if it were one’s own. In *Angelface*, Agatha “takes her foot in her hands, moves it over to the window space, it falls down over the ledge into the room, her body swings up after it” (p. 13). To reassure themselves, the “body-things” which are Foreman’s characters keep making comparisons, measuring up. In *Le Livre des Splendeurs*, Rhoda and Hannah measure their bodies against each other: “Just like me, Just like me”; and in *Pain(t)* (1974), Rhoda informs Ida: “I can match each part of my body to a part of your body” (in RF PM, p. 196).

Comedy inside out. Awareness, “noticing,” as Foreman calls it, is an unrelenting activity, involving physical exertion. Words themselves (those “mind-things” or “mind-objects”) have a physicality. As Rhoda tells Eleanor in *Pain(t)* “We used words like fists” (p. 202). This conception is close to Nathalie Sarraute’s theatre, in which an innocent expression like “C’est beau” can be held to the light, examined carefully, experimented with in various inflections, until it loses any identifiable meaning and becomes a weapon, a little ball of rage, of resistance, an apple of discord between father and son. Language on stage has a physicality of its own — which can be very crude. In *Pain(t)*, the Voice says: “Oh Rhoda, try stuffing the word painter up your ass”; and Rhoda answers: “It’s too big a word” (p. 198).

The stage is an outside which is an inside — a notion which is, in part, what Foreman’s comedy is about. “Collision” may be a key word here. Talking about Gertrude Stein’s theatre, Foreman writes: “The opportunity, as far as I know, has never been seized to mount her plays as I believe they should be — as Stein’s collision with a physical and spatial and temporal reality

— the stage — which DOES resist her.”¹¹ This observation applies to his own theatre as well. For him the stage is a formidable resisting force, a cyclotron in which a perpetual bombardment of atoms is taking place “in each milli-second.”

Foreman shows us what is going on “in each milli-second of being an awake, unbalanced, in-collision-with-nature human being.”¹² Slapstick humor is not simply a machine that generates laughter. When Beckett tackled, in *Film*, the problem of seeing and being seen with an austerity not altogether different from Foreman’s, he used the great silent-movie comedian Buster Keaton. Harold Lloyd, Buster Keaton, the Marx Brothers, Charlie Chaplin: the great American comic tradition draws its power from this very basic “collision-with-nature” which Foreman's theatre in turn relentlessly demonstrates.

¹¹ *Op. cit.* To be published in *Théâtre/public*, with the production of *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*.

¹² “Ontological-Hysteric Manifesto II,” p. 145.