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SLAPSTICK AND COMIC PERFORMANCE

COMEDY AND PAIN

DEMO



Louise Peacock



Slapstick and Comic Performance

DEMO

Also by Louise Peacock

SERIOUS PLAY: Modern Clown Performance

DEMO

Slapstick and Comic Performance

Comedy and Pain

Louise Peacock

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For Keith, Toby and Jonty

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Introduction

Comedy and pain should surely be uneasy bedfellows. There appears to be an obvious contradiction in linking the apparent opposites of comedy (with its connotations of pleasure and laughter) and pain (with its contrasting connotations of discomfort and tears). However, it is likely that we can all recall incidents when the pain or discomfort of others (our own pain rarely moves us to laughter) even in real life has made us laugh. Who, as a child, has not laughed at a classmate who missed their chair and landed unceremoniously on the floor (perhaps you might still laugh as an adult if you saw a colleague do the same thing)? Who has not laughed as some poor innocent struggles to keep their balance on a path made slippery by ice? So, is it in human nature to laugh when we see others in discomfort?

This question has interested philosophers for centuries. The Greeks, whose attitude to laughter will be considered later, and Aristotle in particular, believed that some people take pleasure in the pain of others. They had a word for it. According to Kraut (2002) 'their term for spite – *epichairekakia* – literally means 'joy in evil'. It names the happy sensation one gets when evil befalls others (p. 139). More recent publications such as *When Bad Things Happen to Other People* (Portmann, 2000) and *The Joy of Pain* (Smith, 2013), indicate that this remains a current topic of debate and research. Why do we laugh at or take pleasure in the discomfort of others and what does it reveal about us as individuals if we do? Schopenhauer argues that it is always immoral to feel pleasure in the sufferings of others. According to Portmann, Schopenhauer goes so far as to insist that 'we should expel from our communities anyone ever caught taking pleasure in the injury of others' (Portmann, 2000, p. xvii). For Schopenhauer there is no room for debate as to whether somebody slipping on a banana skin can be considered funny or not. This is a very

stark view and appears to be based more on an ideal world than on a real world. Whether or not Schopenhauer believes that people should laugh at the suffering of others, we know that people do.

Kant's view, on the other hand, appears at least to have some connection with the actual world. He sees that there may be some moral purpose in pain; that it can be a deserved punishment and may serve some social use. In the *Critique of Practical Reason* he suggests that when a man who 'delights in annoying and vexing peaceable people at last receives a right good beating, this is no doubt a bad thing, but everyone approves it and regards it as a good thing' (Kant, 2006, p. 95). This proposes that the idea of deservedness plays a part in our social response to pain. It indicates that some people deserve to suffer and that when that is the case perhaps the moral obligation on those witnessing this suffering to feel compassion or sympathy is lessened. This, of course, raises the question of who is entitled to judge the morality of the situations. By whose rules is the game of punishment for perceived wrongdoing played? In many cases, particularly those with serious moral and even criminal consequences, the issue of deservedness will be indicated by social norms. For example, if one person attempts to punch another but the punch misses and the aggressor punches a wall instead, or is swung around by the force of the punch and falls over, social norms would suggest that their pain is deserved. The observer, therefore, may laugh, able to comfort themselves in their laughter by thinking that the pain was a deserved punishment.

The opposing views of Schopenhauer and Kant at least raise one common concern, which is with the relationship between morality and pain. For Schopenhauer it is always immoral to laugh at suffering; for Kant a moral judgement is made as to the deservedness of the suffering. In life we have to make our own judgements as to whether or not pain is deserved and when we draw morality into that consideration our moral judgements will be based on societal norms, religious beliefs and individual characteristics. In dramatic performance, the writer, performer and director all have the opportunity to indicate to the viewer the response they wish the viewer to have. Much of the focus of this book is on exploring how the creators of slapstick performances involving comic pain and violence structure and present it so that laughter rather than shock or moral outrage is the likely response. In doing this writers, performers and directors rely on the fact that the concept of *schadenfreude*, joy in another's misfortune, is widely accepted and at work in many of our responses to pain and suffering in life and in response to performance.

The term *schadenfreude* indicates the taking of pleasure in the misfortunes of others. Its first use in English is attributed to R.C. Trench in the third edition of *On the Study of Words* in 1852. Trench (who clearly would have agreed with Schopenhauer) is horrified that the word exists 'What a fearful thing is it that any language should have a word expressive of the pleasure which men feel at the calamities of others; for the existence of the word bears testimony to the existence of the thing' (p. 39). Of course we might reasonably suppose that the concept might exist even if we did not have a word for it. However, having a word at least makes discussing the concept more manageable. The fact that we are reliant, however, on translation can lead to difficulties. The German word elides two separate terms. According to the Collins German dictionary the first of these, *schaden*, can be translated as damage, injury, loss or harm whilst the second, *freude*, can be translated as pleasure, joy or delight. In order to translate any of these combinations into fluent English, speakers have to insert more words such as 'taking joy in harm'. The OED goes further, defining *schadenfreude* as 'Malicious enjoyment of the misfortunes of others.' This idea of malicious enjoyment is commonly associated with *schadenfreude*, suggesting that it is wrong for us to laugh at the misfortune of others. However, the existence of the word and its continued usage suggests that *schadenfreude* remains widely recognised. Portmann (2000) devotes considerable attention to exploring whether the German indicates the involvement of malice. Is it possible to take pleasure in another's suffering without that pleasure being motivated by malice? Malice is a term loaded with negative connotations. It is not possible to think of a way of using malice in such a way as to render it positive. However, the extent to which malice is closely connected with laughter at another's pain is debatable in real life and is even more questionable when we laugh in response to performed pain.

One of the concerns of this book, therefore, is to explore what exactly makes us laugh at the suffering of others. Perhaps we are relieved to see others in trouble rather than ourselves or perhaps we are amused by their comical facial expressions or the strange contortions of the body as it strives to avoid pain; sometimes we may be pleased to see our superiors brought low. In the writing of this book my own undergraduate students have furthered my understanding of when and how we laugh at others in pain. In one class based, appropriately, on *Commedia dell'arte*, a student was rehearsing a *lazzo*. In this *lazzo* she, in role as a stressed PA, tries to deal with office equipment that will not respond as she expects it to. Initially the audience of her peers and I were laughing at the skill of her performance. However, part way through the

sequence she trod on an upturned electrical plug, belonging to a newly introduced prop. It was immediately clear to all of us that this must have hurt though she tried to incorporate her pained response into her performance. She continued through the sequence but was clearly trying to avoid putting her weight on her foot. At the moment that she trod on the plug there was a huge roar of laughter from her classmates, led most enthusiastically by her twin sister. Whilst the piece began as a performance, we were fully aware that the pain was real (indeed her foot was bruised and the prongs of the plug had broken the surface of the skin). Yet we still laughed. Partly this may have been because we were already laughing at her contortions and facial expressions as she rehearsed. We were primed, therefore, to find her actions funny. Even those who might be assumed to be close to her such as her sister and her friends laughed freely. When I questioned them afterwards they struggled to analyse why they had laughed even when they knew she was really hurt. They were helped, obviously, by the fact that she continued the scene. Perhaps they were also helped by knowing that this individual plays rugby and has a reputation for injuring herself and not seeming to mind. The fact that they experienced the moment in a group also facilitated their laughter. According to Schopenhauer our response was immoral. Even Kant might have struggled with our response as she had done nothing to deserve her suffering. Her only fault was to fail to control a new prop. The audience could not even excuse themselves with the defence that the pain was performed (a consideration that will recur time and again in later chapters as various forms of suffering in performance are explored). We knew that this was real pain and that it was not a rehearsed part of the *lazzo* but still we laughed, demonstrating the human propensity to find the pain of others funny.

Incidents like these and the difficulty in assessing exactly why we laugh have contributed to the genesis of this project which seeks first and foremost to analyse how and why we laugh at performed pain. However, performed pain cannot be considered entirely in isolation because our responses to it are likely to be inflected by how far we feel laughter is an appropriate response to pain in real life. For this reason philosophers like Schopenhauer and Kant provide a useful context whereby attitudes to real pain and suffering can be used to highlight the differences between response to actual pain and performed pain.

When the notions of comedy and pain are transported to an arena or performance frame in which it is clear to us that the pain apparently

suffered is not real we can probably call to mind an even wider range of examples of ways that we have been made to laugh by the spectacle of other people's pain.

Slapstick and comic theory

Comedy has long been accorded second-class status in academic criticism which has traditionally awarded far more importance and consideration to tragedy. According to Stott 'the most important factor in deciding the status of comedy in the academy is the simple fact that as tragedy occupies a privileged space in *Poetics*, it has been seen to occupy the privileged space in literary culture' (2005, p. 20). Despite the absence of an analysis of comedy in Aristotle's work, over the centuries a number of significant thinkers and philosophers have turned their attention to comedy and it is on the work of such writers as Hobbes, Hutcheson, Kant, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Lowell and Freud that comic theory is based. Between them these writers established the three central theories that seek to explain how we respond to comedy: superiority, incongruity and relief. More recent theorists such as Stott (2005), Critchley (2002), Morreall (1983) and Palmer (1993) have extended and revisioned the ways in which these theories can be used by academics as a lens through which to view the workings of comedy. Whilst each of these theories will be considered in detail as appropriate in relation to relevant examples in the following chapters, they can be briefly outlined in the following way.

Superiority theory is based on the writings of Plato, Aristotle and Hobbes and can be defined as the instinct to laugh when we experience a 'suddaine glorie arising from suddaine Conception of some Eminency in our selves, by Comparison with Infirmityes of others, or with our owne formerly' (Hobbes, 1969, p. 42). In relation to comic pain, therefore, according to superiority theory we might laugh because the victim is in pain whilst we are pain free or because they have done something to cause the pain which, in our 'eminency', we feel that we would not have done. This can, of course, easily be applied to the performance of comic pain which involves incompetence on the part of the sufferer but it has limitations when we come to consider the wider range of performed pain where, for example, notions of morality and justice come into play.

Incongruity theory, which is based on the writings of Hutcheson, Kant and Schopenhauer suggests that laughter is a response to what

we perceive as a gap or disjunction between what we expected to happen and what actually occurs. In such cases the performance leads the viewer to expect a particular outcome but the expectation is subverted in the way the humorous sequence ends. The strength of the performance frame and the comic frame is important here because without those two the incongruity may come as a shock without provoking laughter. It is also worth considering the importance of social and performative norms in relation to incongruity. The audience and the performer/director must have some shared understanding of what is expected in order to be able to subvert it. It is also true that physical gags that may have been incongruous when they were first performed (for example hitting somebody in the face with a pie) can be removed from incongruity by familiarity. If they are repeated often enough they establish themselves instead as performance clichés. The incongruity now would be for the pie not to be smashed into somebody's face.

Relief theory relies on the notion, expounded by Spencer and extended by Freud, that laughter is a release of pent-up energy. This is particularly likely to occur when the viewer has been made to feel tense, uncomfortable or even scared. When that tension is released the energy that would have been expended is released through laughter. It is clear to see how relief theory may work in conjunction with incongruity theory if the tension is released in response to incongruous action. Later we will also need to consider relief theory in relation to the technique of escalation.

These three theories are rarely at work in isolation and an extended gag sequence may take the viewer through responses that coincide with more than one of them. Equally there are elements that may provoke laughter but that do not readily coincide with any of these theories. It is possible, for example, to laugh with pleasure at the exhibition of skill. This can occur in a comic performance context but is not peculiar to it. This kind of response could for example be experienced when watching a footballer execute a series of step-overs or other tricks which make the opposition look incompetent. There is a demonstration of superiority here just as there is when Michael Crawford as Frank Spencer roller-skates his way through the multiple hazards of a seemingly impossible sequence but, in this case, the superiority is not felt by viewer. Indeed the viewer may well feel inferior in such a situation. So a pleasure laugh of this kind is not readily covered by the existing theories. Morreall, writing in *Taking Laughter Seriously* (1983), seeks to provide a new theory that synthesises and extends the existing theories. Part of the need to

do this derives from what he identifies as the huge range of experiences that may make us laugh in both intentionally and unintentionally humorous situations. Obviously for the purposes of this book only the former set of situations is relevant. Morreall's response is to try to create a new theory and at the heart of this lies his assertion that 'Laughter results from a pleasant psychological shift' (p. 39). This will prove a useful touchstone in assessing the various provocations to laughter offered by comic violence and comic pain. The key issue is to identify exactly what provokes the pleasant nature of the psychological shift. The primary difficulty with each of the original theories and with Morreall's response to them is that none of them were formulated as a way of conceptualising comedy in performance. Rather they consider the ways in which laughter and humour occur in life and, to a lesser extent, each considers also how it occurs in literature. It would seem likely then that such theorists as Bergson and Bakhtin who focus more specifically on the body might be helpful, given the centrality of the body in slapstick performance.

At first glance it seems likely that Henri Bergson's views about what we find comic as expressed in *Laughter* will be particularly relevant to a consideration of what is funny. However, this misconception arises from Bergson's oft-quoted statement that 'the attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine' (2005, p. 15). Writing in the first decade of the last century Bergson's thinking is heavily influenced by the notion of a duality between man and machine. However, this concentration on the role of automatism in comedy is limiting when it comes to dealing with the range of physical action and activity that defines slapstick performance. So whilst some examples of physical comedy certainly provide us with examples of rigidity and absentmindedness, there are also many examples that will not be readily dealt with in these terms, relying as they do on mastery, timing and complex movement. Where Bergson is more useful in relation to slapstick comedy is in his identification of three processes which are often at work in comedy. These are repetition, inversion and reciprocal interference of series. For Bergson, repetition can be inherently comic. He gives the example of bumping into a friend whom you have not seen for a long time. If this happens once it is not funny. If it should happen three or four times on the same day then it becomes funny. The humour derives, at least in part, from the improbability of the event. The term inversion, according to Bergson, relates mainly to roles. In this way there is humour to be derived when characters act in ways that are not expected

of them or when their roles trap them into a pattern of behaviour that the audience can see is not helpful to them. For example, in Pinero's *The Magistrate* Poskett's role ensures that he unwittingly imprisons his wife. The reciprocal interference of series is harder to define in that it can occur in so many forms. In performance the most common form occurs when two characters come into contact each with an independent way of interpreting the situation they are in. However the two characters simultaneously believe very different things about the situation. The humour arises from the audience's appreciation of the instances when the two interpretations collide. These, together with what Bergson calls 'the snowball', offer useful tools for analysing exactly what is happening in physical comedy and provide ready labels for commonly occurring techniques. One difficulty with Bergson's thinking is his insistence that 'laughter is above all corrective' (2005, p. 96). Obviously laughter can often operate in this way but the laughter that is provoked by slapstick humour does not always have a corrective function. In everyday life we may laugh at somebody who does something ridiculous and they may well experience that laughter as a kind of punishment and may alter their behaviour to avoid a repeat punishment. However, the skilled performer of slapstick seeks our laughter and experiences it as a reward. Perhaps, then the function of laughter is to discourage others from behaving in a similar way. This would seem more likely if the comic actions were in some way morally reprehensible. Most often slapstick comedy centres on a performed incompetence. Only rarely, for example in *The Great Dictator* or *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* is slapstick used to convey a more moral or political message. Mikhail Bakhtin's writings about the grotesque body, focusing as they do on bodily functions and vulgarity rather than on pain and comic violence, are even less useful to us. It seems, then, that while some useful insights can be found in earlier philosophical writings on comedy and humour, in order to comprehend slapstick and, in particular, the performance of comic pain and violence it is necessary to establish a new model through which such performances can be analysed. That, in part, is the purpose of this book. This model, once established, will then be applied to a wide range of examples which can be found in the performance of comic pain.

So let us consider, briefly, the sheer range of examples of performed comic pain (and this list is by no means exhaustive): Punch hitting Judy, circus clowns falling out of 'burning' buildings or tripping each other up, the ongoing battles between Tom and Jerry, numerous examples from the *Carry On* films, Jim Carrey in *Liar Liar*, Dario Fo's *Trumpets and Raspberries* or *Accidental Death of An Anarchist*, Ben Stiller in *There's*

Something about Mary, Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times* or *The Kid*, Buster Keaton in *Steamboat Bill Jr*, the Three Stooges, the Marx Brothers, Laurel and Hardy, Michael Crawford in *Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em*, Basil and Manuel in *Fawlty Towers*, numerous sequences from *Monty Python's Flying Circus* and the Python films. Some of these and many other examples will be considered in greater detail later in the book. What such a list does, however, is to demonstrate the depth and breadth of material which can be considered in a study of comic pain, much of which has not been subjected to serious scrutiny prior to this book. Why such a popular and ubiquitous facet of comic performance has not been considered in any detail previously is an interesting question and is clearly related to what has traditionally been a dismissal of comic and popular forms as largely unworthy of academic interest. Recent decades have seen both popular culture and comic modes of creation receiving wider academic consideration as we seek to understand what contribution such forms make to our culture. This book, therefore, sits within these developing fields and focuses on how the performance of comic pain and comic violence is delivered and received.

This rich pool of contemporary and historic material is one of the main motivations for writing this book. Culturally, the performance of pain to provoke laughter is a common phenomenon but very little has been written which addresses how such performances work or what factors govern the viewer's response. The main purpose of this book, therefore, is to establish a model and taxonomy through which the techniques and significance of the performance of comic pain can be analysed. The book is determinedly multi-disciplinary in its focus, drawing examples from live performance, television, animation and film in equal measure. Inevitably the reader will think of examples that I have not included. My aim is not to provide an encyclopedia of slapstick but to use a range of examples that will enable the reader to understand the concepts being suggested and the ways in which they might be applied. By what criteria have I selected my examples? I refer back into history as far as the Greeks and reach as far forward as the 2010 film, *Furry Vengeance*. What this indicates is the longevity of the appeal of comic pain and comic violence. In selecting examples I have tried to choose texts and performances that are readily available so that the reader may already have encountered them or would be able to read or watch them without too much difficulty. I have drawn on a range of live and media-tised modes of performance because there are interesting connections to be made and contrasts to be drawn with regard to the different ways in which the audience responds to a live performer or one distanced via a

mediatised format. Naturally I have also selected examples that I believe are successful and that are likely to make the intended audience laugh.

Structurally this is a book of two parts. Part I, which comprises of the first three chapters, has the primary aims of discussing the theoretical context of this work and establishing a vocabulary and taxonomy for analysing examples of comic pain and comic violence. The first chapter explores how slapstick has been defined in the past by academics in the areas of theatre, film and television, before moving on to establish a definition of slapstick which can be used to discuss performances which occur across both live and mediatised modes of performance, acknowledging the commonalities between them and highlighting the differences. It also considers long-established comic theories and explores the ways in which they may contribute to our understanding of comic pain in performance. The second chapter explores what I have defined as the *dynamics* of slapstick. The dynamics of performing slapstick are affected by a number of elements both structural and performative. Structural features include repetition, inversion, escalation and manipulation of anticipation. Performative features include the number of performers involved as well as specific performance techniques. Consideration will be paid to the number of performers involved and to the nature of the relationship between them in those instances where there is more than one performer.

The third chapter interrogates the concept of comedy and pain, considering the kinds of laughter provoked by comic pain. The roles of empathy and objectification are also considered here to explore the ways in which either may block or encourage laughter. The latter part of this chapter puts forwards a model for analysing comic pain and suggests a taxonomy by which different kinds of comic pain may be identified. The purpose of this is to establish a framework through which examples of comic pain and comic violence can be analysed later in the book. This model will not, however, become a straitjacket restricting consideration only to ideas which fit within the model. It will also be interesting to consider which examples may not be well served by this model and to explore why.

Throughout these chapters examples are drawn from theatre, film and television to illustrate the ideas discussed and to provide concrete examples of the abstract elements considered.

The theoretical stance and critical taxonomy posited in the first part of the book is applied in Part II, in four chapters, each focusing on a different area of pain as presented for entertainment. Once again, I have attempted to use examples drawn from live performance (including

commedia dell'arte, circus, Punch and Judy and stage plays), from film (including both historic and more recent instances of slapstick performance) and from television (drawing examples from sitcoms, sketch shows and animation). The first chapter in Part II, Chapter 4, analyses illustrations of, and responses to, *accidental* pain, whether self-inflicted or inflicted on or by others. In each of these examples human agency is at work. Either a person accidentally hurts him or herself or one person hurts another, often as a result of incompetence. This human interaction plays an important part in how the audience responds to the infliction of pain. In Chapter 5 the focus is on pain caused by what I define as malevolent objects, or by animals. In these cases there is no human agency. The pain may be considered a true accident and it may not be possible to apportion blame for what happens. Once again this affects the audience's response to comic pain because no consideration has to be given to who is at fault. In contrast, the concept of fault or blame is central to Chapter 6 which explores pain that is intentionally inflicted. Intention inevitably leads to a consideration of morality. It is impossible to watch one individual deliberately inflicting pain on another without being drawn into a consideration of justice. Does the victim deserve the pain? Is the inflictor in any way in the right? These questions of morality infect the way in which the audience responds to the depiction of comic violence and comic pain. Broadly put, if the pain appears deserved we are more likely to laugh than if it appears to be unjust. The situation, however, is rarely that simple and Chapter 6 offers a detailed consideration of a number of complex examples which raise issues of morality within a resolutely fictional frame. The book's final chapter expands the exploration of the role of morality in relation to the pleasure to be derived from watching comic violence and comic pain by exploring examples of pain drawn from real life rather than from fictional performance. In each of these cases, though, the pain is presented for our entertainment through a variety of reality television formats in which stunts are deliberately created in order to be filmed or in which accidents that happen to have been captured on film are presented for our entertainment. This raises the interesting question of where the responsibility and morality are located. If the victim presents him or herself willingly does that absolve the audience from responsibility? Or, in consuming what is presented, does the audience become implicated? This final chapter also considers a number of examples in which the pain or risk was intended to be performed but became, in fact, real. In these instances performers suffered real pain but this was still broadcast, either as a result of live transmission or because filming

continued and the resulting footage was used, just as the fictional version would have been.

It should be clear by now that laughing in response to another's pain is far from a simple matter. Moral issues around whether it is right to laugh at another's misfortunes or at what point such laughter can be morally justified demand detailed consideration. Equally worthy of detailed analysis are the means by which slapstick performance uses performative techniques and structural devices to encourage the audience to give the desired response.

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Part I

Establishing a Critical Framework

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1

What is Slapstick?

Examples of what might be defined as slapstick can be readily recognised from Greek theatre onwards but the notion finds its fullest early expression in *commedia dell'arte*. However, the question of exactly what slapstick is, has still not been addressed in existing literature. As the concept is central to this book, before we go any further it will be helpful to establish a working definition of what is meant by the term slapstick. This in itself is no mean feat. As slapstick has rarely been considered in any detail by academia such definitions as do exist must either be drawn from dictionaries or from more anecdotal or biographical texts. This lack of consideration and analysis would seem to be the outcome of a broadly held opinion that slapstick is lightweight and un-intellectual. As with many popular forms of performance, slapstick has been enjoyed by many but explored and analysed by relatively few. Equally such academic writing as exists does so across a range of media and the definition thus far offered of slapstick on film is necessarily different from (and much more extensive than) the way in which slapstick might be defined on the stage. What is needed here is a definition of slapstick that can be understood in relation to all the modes of performance considered in this book.

So, where to begin? The term slapstick is often thought to derive from the English translation of '*batacchio*', the Italian word used to describe the wooden stick carried by Arlecchino in the *commedia dell'arte*. This was 'derived from the Bergamese peasant stick used for driving cattle. Two thin pieces of wood are kept apart at the handle and slap against each other when a blow is stopped on the moment of impact' (Rudlin, 1994, p. 77). In this way when Arlecchino struck a person with it or was struck by it, it made a satisfyingly loud sound without inflicting any real pain. Here then is a clue to the first element of slapstick performance: it

offers the sound (although, as witnessed in the silent film era, it works equally with silence) and appearance of the infliction and suffering of pain without the actual anguish.

In its earliest incarnations slapstick is to be found in live theatre performance and its development can be traced through a range of predominantly popular theatre forms from *commedia dell'arte*, to Punch and Judy, to circus clowns, to pantomime and to farce. I do not mean to suggest that there is a direct, chronological lineage from each of these forms to the next but what is clear is that the slapstick that was wielded by Arlecchino is a close relative of the one used to such good effect by Mr Punch. The comic sound effects of *commedia dell'arte* find an echo in the percussive beatings Mr Punch inflicts; in the shouts and screams of the circus clowns as they trip and are tripped. The comic violence present in Pantalone's beatings of Arlecchino reverberates through to the comic fights and brawls found in a wide range of farces. The stereotypical pairings of 'goodies' and 'baddies' of *commedia* reappear in pantomime as the villains endeavour to wreck the plot only to be thwarted by goodness and true love. It is possible, therefore, to establish a very general sense of slapstick – closely related to its name and derivation – through which we can understand that slapstick will include comic violence and comic sound effects. This is, evidently, only a starting point. We need to look elsewhere to extend this definition.

Dictionary definitions offer common conceptions of slapstick. The *Oxford English Dictionary* online offers the following definition, 'Knockabout comedy or humour, farce, horseplay' (OED, 2011) which while rather unhelpful in its brevity does identify some key elements that might be expected in slapstick performance. The online *Encyclopedia Britannica* offers:

a type of physical comedy characterised by broad humour, absurd situations and vigorous, usually violent action. The slapstick comic, more than a mere funny man or buffoon, must often be an acrobat, a stunt performer, and something of a magician – a master of uninhibited action and perfect timing. Outrageous make-believe violence has always been a key attraction of slapstick comedy...

(Britannica, 2011)

This definition is potentially interesting in that, as well as categorising some ingredients of slapstick, it also emphasises the importance of the make-believe nature of the violence. The use of the word 'outrageous' also nods towards what will be discussed later in the chapter in relation

to the role of excess in slapstick. Also of importance is that this definition ventures towards identifying particular skills that are needed by the performer. It is vital, therefore, not only to consider the content of the slapstick sketch as it is performed but also to consider the demands placed on the performer. Thus, in defining slapstick, notions of mastery and timing should be considered in addition to the list of ingredients above.

Writing more generally about Comedy, Stott claims that

‘Slapstick’ is generally understood as physical humour of a robust and hyperbolized nature where stunts, acrobatics, pain and violence are standard features. Broad comedy of this type has been around since Aristophanes, but the form known as slapstick came into being as practically the sole condition of comedy in early American Cinema. (Stott, 2005, p. 87)

Whilst it is true that early American cinema did not appear to be able to conceive of a comedy that was not slapstick (largely because it communicated so readily to the audience without sound), it is necessary to take issue with Stott’s dismissal of the tradition of slapstick which flourished between Aristophanes and, say, Chaplin, Keaton and Mack Sennett and without which slapstick may not have been a vital enough tradition to make the transition to celluloid. It is, of course, the contention of this book that a lively slapstick tradition can be traced from Arlecchino’s *batacchio*, through Punch and Judy, through pantomime and through stage plays right to the present and that this more or less unbroken tradition made the transition onto screen in the early years of the twentieth century. If the tradition has flourished on stage it has positively exploded (sometimes literally) on screen and it is possible to find a wide range of examples from Sennett, Chaplin and Keaton through to more contemporary examples such as *The Hangover* (in all three of its incarnations). Before we become too involved in the range of opportunities offered by film, however, let us move further into a consideration of how theatrical slapstick is defined.

Slapstick on stage

Slapstick has been considered in a limited way by academics working in theatre and performance studies. However, critical texts in the area of theatre performance are not very helpful in defining slapstick. Kenneth Pickering’s *Key Concepts in Theatre and Performance* (2010) does not include a definition of slapstick – presumably he did not consider

it to be that key a concept, despite the fact that it has existed for centuries. As John Wright acknowledges ‘most of our rhythmic physical comedy and our knockabout slapstick routines ... [have their] origins in *Commedia dell’Arte*’ (2006, p. 182). In his book *Slapstick! The Illustrated Story of Knockabout Comedy* Tony Staveacre identifies the way in which violence is performed as key in identifying slapstick. ‘Violence – or the parody of violence. There’s a delicate distinction. The “injury laugh” must always be carefully calculated: if a blow seems to cause real pain, there will, usually, be no laughter’ (1987, p. 41). Beyond this, the closest Staveacre comes to identifying what slapstick is is presented through his chapter headings, some of which read as a list of potential ingredients: tumbling, physical encounters, props, traps, tricks and flaps, sparring partners, inspired lunacy, visual vulgarity and victimisation.

The definitions offered above are helpful but are not particularly comprehensive nor do they directly address all the forms of live performance in which slapstick can be seen. In order, therefore, to extend these definitions I will explore a range of modes of theatrical performance which involve slapstick. This will help to create a definition that is based on what actually occurs in forms such as *commedia dell’arte*, Punch and Judy, circus clowning, pantomime and farce, each of which contains elements of slapstick.

Commedia dell’arte

Elsewhere I have suggested that Pantalone and Arlecchino can be regarded as a slapstick double act (Peacock, 2013), situated at the heart of *commedia dell’arte*. As such they provide the main (though not sole) opportunity for the performance of comic violence and pain within *commedia*. The fact that both characters are masked and move in physically stylised ways helps to distance them from the actuality of pain. The entertainment value is also increased for the audience by the status differential between them. They are master and servant and this oppositional relationship explains why Pantalone is usually trying to control Arlecchino and why he will resort to blows to keep Arlecchino’s natural exuberance in check. The importance of Arlecchino’s slapstick cannot be ignored and it is frequently involved in the portrayal of comic violence in *commedia*. Commonly Pantalone takes the slapstick from Arlecchino and uses it to give him a beating. It is often the case that the beating is a punishment for either Arlecchino’s rudeness in speaking to his master or for his incompetence in carrying out some task that has been assigned to him. The highly stylised performance style of *commedia*, combined with the masks worn by many characters discourages the

audience from engaging in a naturalistic empathic relationship with any of the characters. It is often the case that Arlecchino can be understood to be deserving of a beating. For example in Goldoni's *A Servant to Two Masters* the Arlecchino character, Truffaldino, is hired by two individuals, each of whom believes that Truffaldino is serving only them. Coincidentally the two masters (one of whom is actually a woman in disguise) stay in the same inn. This lures Truffaldino into believing that he can sustain his dual role. However he is beaten by both masters as a punishment for his various failings. In act 2, scene 16 of the Lee Hall version (1999) the stage directions indicate that 'Beatrice gives him a good thrashing' (p. 68). Whilst the stage direction does not give much clue as to how Beatrice thrashes Truffaldino the thrashing goes on long enough to be observed by Florindo (Truffaldino's other master). At the opening of the next scene Truffaldino describes it as 'grievous bodily harm' (p. 68). The opportunity for Beatrice to take pleasure in the beating and for Truffaldino to play his reactions out to the audience is evident. In the next scene he is beaten by Florindo for allowing himself to be beaten by Beatrice. There is the possibility, therefore, for comedy to be derived either through repetition or variation.

Punch and Judy

Whilst many of those who write about Punch and Judy (for example, Leach, 1985; Speaight, 1970; and Stead, 1950) acknowledge the presence of Mr Punch's stick and whilst they take great pleasure in counting up the number of blows Mr Punch rains down on his victims, none of them actually describes what is taking place as slapstick. Here lies a significant difficulty in discussing theatrical versions of slapstick, the word comes into common usage only when critics begin to analyse the comic films made as the film industry established itself at the turn of the twentieth century, and in the theatrical context it has to be applied retrospectively. Later in the chapter I will explore the definitions of slapstick offered by film academics. Meanwhile, the fact that none of the academics writing about Punch and Judy – even in the second half of the twentieth century – chose to apply the word slapstick to what they were seeing and analysing, does not mean that it does not fit within the definition of slapstick that we are delineating here. In trying to establish Punch and Judy as worthy of academic consideration, it better suited their purposes to focus on the potential moral and social function of Mr Punch's violence than to identify it as a specific comedic technique with a primary purpose of laughter provocation. This is certainly the case, for example, in Robert Leach's *Punch and Judy: History, Tradition*

and Meaning (1985) in which he suggests that Punch is a working-class hero rebelling against a range of social constraints including marriage, the police, the judiciary and the church. However true this might be, it remains the case that much of what Mr Punch does fits within the areas identified by Staveacre. Punch engages in physical encounters (a whole stream of them in fact, most commonly involving Judy, the baby, the policeman, the Beadle, the distinguished foreigner, Toby the Dog, the hangman and the devil). He uses props (primarily his stick but this is often joined by sausages and sometimes by a frying pan); Mr Punch's chases across the puppet booth stage and his appearance though the curtains below the stage ledge provide an alternative to traps and flaps. There is inspired lunacy and most definitely victimisation. Importantly Mr Punch, in his very incarnation as a wooden puppet, ensures that however fierce the violence nobody is really hurt. Beyond the list suggested by Staveacre, Punch and Judy performances also contain examples of mastery and timing which are central to successful slapstick performance.

Circus clowning

Circus clown entrées, which were most common from the mid-nineteenth century onwards across the UK, Europe and America, demonstrate an enthusiasm for primarily physical gags which revolve around one clown, usually the Auguste, being tripped, beaten or in some other way hurt either by the whiteface clown or the ring master or as a result of his own incompetence. As with the wooden puppet that is Mr Punch, the outlandish costumes and elaborate face make-up go some way towards establishing an otherness about the performers that mitigates the appearance of pain. When this is combined with the fact that the clowns always rebound at the end of the act, the defining aspect of the parody or show of violence rather than actual violence is established and creates a comic frame within which the audience can laugh as the clown receives a pie in the face or is tripped by an over-enthusiastic colleague as the clowns rush to put out a fire or chase each other round the circus ring trying to jump onto a car. Often such sequences are supported by live music, loud sound effects and flashing lights, all of which serve to emphasise the performance frame. One example of how such entrées work can be drawn from the Ringling Bros and Barnum and Bailey Circus 2011 141st Edition 'Fully Charged' (Ringling, 2011). In this scene the focus is on how many clowns it takes to change a light bulb. In order to change the light bulb the clowns bring on an array of stepladders and straight ladders and each of these affords the

opportunity for some kind of trip or fall. The scene lasts just over four minutes and involves at least eight incidents of slapstick. The accumulation of minor bumps and falls escalates towards the climax of the scene, building a sense of anticipation and of recognition in the audience. The first example of slapstick pain is one that most audience members would be able to recognise and identify with. One clown carries in a step ladder and puts it down on the foot of a second clown. The second clown hops around for a few seconds ensuring that the audience notices what has happened. No great skill level is needed to perform this and the pain potential is not serious. The audience is free to respond with a laugh of recognition. This gentle opening establishes the clowns' inability to tackle the task they have been set. It is clear that their incompetence is likely to result in further examples of accidental pain. These examples escalate both in terms of the skill needed to perform the stunt and the level of pain supposedly inflicted. In this way the pain provides a structure for the *entr  e*, leading to the climax in which one of the clowns is caught up in the final explosion of the light bulb. Before that climax the audience witnesses a series of other painful acts. A clown slides down the ladder and tumbles backwards over a clown kneeling at the bottom. Next a box is dropped over the head of a clown who runs around and crashes into the step ladder, knocking another to the floor. The next example includes an internal repetition as two clowns pass a single ladder between them and it hits one of them in the face. They get the ladder upright and celebrate, only to have it slip and hit him again. This causes him to stumble and he bangs his face into the ladder for the third time. There is an interesting level of variation here as, although only one of the clowns is being struck, the first two bumps are caused by the other clown while the third injury is self-inflicted. All the examples up to this point have involved two clowns working together. These are drawn from the ensemble of nine clowns who perform this *entr  e*. In each partnership one appears marginally more capable than the other but the double acts are not developed enough to be worthy of further analysis. An ensemble performance involving eight of the clowns offers the next example of accidental pain. This routine is much more overtly choreographed and, as a result, the audience is unlikely to imagine themselves in a similar situation. Two clowns hold a ladder up whilst a further six clowns form a semi-circle around it. The duo turn the ladder over twice holding it parallel to the floor. One of them then takes the ladder and walks away with it. In doing so she hits each of the clowns forming the semi-circle in turn without even noticing the damage she is doing. Each clown is hit and falls in their own fashion

so although there is repetition in the six clowns being hit, there is also enjoyment to be derived from the variety of the falls. The rapid succession of falls constitutes an escalation and increases the rhythm and speed of the *entr  e*, pushing it further from reality. The next example relies on the threat of pain. A taller ladder is brought in and one clown climbs to the top of it and sways about. The audience anticipates another fall which does not come. This promise of a fall which is denied is another way in which the suggestion of pain can be used to punctuate and vary a slapstick scene. Finally, the clowns bring in a taller step ladder and one clown hurries up it only to bump his head on the light bulb at the top. The other clowns throw the over-sized replacement light bulb around. He tries to catch it, the ladder falls and he is left dangling from the original light bulb. The much larger-than-life bulbs also serve to emphasise the unrealistic nature of the task. As he dangles the lights flicker and there is the sound of an explosion. The spotlight on the dangling clown goes out and another spotlight comes on at the other side of the circus ring where a clown double is dangling in billows of smoke, flailing around as if in pain. The audience may well experience what Morreall defines as a pleasant psychological shift at this turn of events as it is unlikely that they would have anticipated the use of a clown double to suggest that the clown had been blown from one place to another. The sound effects and the use of smoke indicate the cartoonish nature of the pain resulting from the clowns' incompetence.

Pantomime

In pantomime much of the customary violence that we would associate with slapstick appears in the 'slop' or 'slosh' scenes. These occur in most pantomimes and are usually set-piece routines and gag combinations that have been played out many times before and that rely on a combination of physical comedy and slapstick. The use of 'slosh' blurs the boundaries between performance and reality for the audience. Often the pantomime dame is involved in these scenes and the use of drag, extravagant costume and make-up reinforces the performative nature of the character as does the common use of very broad characterisation in pantomime. Combined with the clearly theatrical nature of the set, lighting and sound effects this reinforces the sense of unreality that we have already identified as being important to the performance of slapstick. On the other hand, when a bucket of slosh is thrown across the stage the performer really is getting wet or sticky. Frow provides details of a slosh scene from *Harlequin the Sorcerer* which was performed at the Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre on 21 January 1725. In the comic interlude of

this pantomime 'Harlequin turns himself into an old washer-woman ... Pantaloon and servant come in, and after being soused with the soapsuds, are driven off by the supposed washer-woman with a bowl of boiling water from the copper, to the no small diversion of both galleries' (1985, p. 43). Nearly 300 years ago audiences were entertained by the throwing around of water and by the threat of pain (via scalding from the boiling water) for the performers. This description accords with Taylor's view that the slosh scenes and chases provide a 'moment of danger and involvement for audiences and performers that increases the awareness of the liveness of each individual performance' (2007, p. 35). This moment of potential danger has been part of pantomime's appeal since Joey Grimaldi hurled himself through star traps, taking very real physical risks. For the audience this element of reality in the artificiality of the theatrical setting adds an extra frisson to the enjoyment and enhances the laughter when the action is safely completed.

By the 1870s it is possible to find examples of overt violence in pantomimes which suggest echoes of or parallels with Punch and Judy. James Johnson's *An Account of Pantomime* offers an account of what is called the clown's 'How to Nurse' routine. Johnson describes a sequence of events in which the clown treats the baby as badly as Punch treats his own baby and the description ends 'catch hold of [baby's] ankles, and swinging it round your head by its legs, thrash the Pantaloon off the stage with the baby, and throw it after him' (cited in Frow, 1985, p. 86). This is far more violent than the slosh scenes with their relatively harmless throwing of ingredients such as flour and water. Throwing a baby connects with notions of excess discussed later and inevitably echoes the treatment of the baby in Punch and Judy. Perhaps this association highlights the lack of reality in this element of the performance. Beyond that how this scene would be received would be affected by the way it was performed and the evidently wooden unreality of the 'baby', which might establish enough comic distance to free the audience to laugh. However, it is also true that some of the audience may have been shocked by such overt violence, even in the pantomime context. Slosh scenes, on the other hand, most of which are performed by the pantomime dame and the principal comic, provide a cartoonish version of excessive behaviour without suggesting – beyond the mild frisson inspired by the reality of the slosh – that either the dame (distanced from reality by cross-dressing and excessive make-up) or the principal comic are likely to be hurt by any of the action. Indeed the nature of the slosh scenes provides the opportunity for a comic double act to entertain the audience as we watch their rivalry to get the upper hand.

Taylor does give examples of solo slosh scenes but acknowledges that 'by far the majority involve the two comics in a competition with the lower status comic trying to reverse the roles and wreak comic vengeance on the higher' (2007, p. 41). The connection back to the central status-driven double act of *commedia dell'arte* is clear. So there are two important elements here in relation to theatrical slapstick. One is the importance of a central double act and the second is the role played by status interaction and the notion of vengeance. This relates to ideas that will be explored later about the ethics and morality of slapstick in which we often see the down-trodden attempt to get their revenge on their superior. Given the historical overlap of pantomime and farce as forms of theatrical genre it is hardly surprising that we can identify a number of overlaps in the ways in which the two have recourse to slapstick.

Farce

Farce is a genre of theatrical performance which, whilst not entirely reliant on slapstick, makes great use of it to provoke laughter. Indeed according to Smith 'The sole point and justification of a farce is that it be funny. Farce is comedy written with a slapstick rather a pen' (1989, p. 5). Whilst this clearly highlights the connection between the performance style of farce and slapstick, this assertion perhaps goes too far. Farce may have a primary purpose of laughter provocation but it is also clear that some farces (those of Pinero and Orton for example) share with some other slapstick performances a social function in that they draw attention to the moral inconsistencies of the societies for which they were written. In these farces comic pain or violence may be used as a punishment for those acting immorally or may be dealt out by those who are clearly villainous, provoking the audience into making a judgement about the morality or otherwise of the violent action. Milner Davis identifies the importance of the establishment of a comic frame in freeing the audience to laugh at the extreme violence they witness. She suggests that 'caricature of outline and synchronisation of movement ... reassure[s] the viewer that their creatures will rise phoenix like from beneath the steam roller' (1978, p. 30). The allusion to cartoons and caricatures highlights the importance of the creation of characters with whom we do not entirely empathise as realistic creations. If the characters are caricatures we are more likely to be able to laugh as they undergo pain and duress safe in the knowledge that neither they nor the pain inflicted are real, however vigorously they perform their response to it with writhing and screaming. Examples of violence and pain in farce are to be found throughout its history. Not all farces include comic

violence as an element but many do, from the simple slaps around the face in Labiche's *A Slap in the Farce* (trans. Shapiro), to the repetitive wrestling of Charley in Thomas's *Charley's Aunt*, to the much more aggressive use of violence in Orton's *Loot*, to the accidentally inflicted pain in both Frayn's *Noises Off* and Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* and *Trumpets and Raspberries*. This is not intended to be a comprehensive list of farces but rather to suggest that these plays provide helpful examples of how comic pain and violence is put to use in farce. They will be considered briefly here in order to establish how farce makes use of violence but they will be subjected to more detailed analysis later. *A Slap in the Farce* reveals the importance of a central absurdity in establishing the comic frame that has already been identified as a vital step towards signalling that laughter rather than sympathy is an acceptable response to the violence we witness. Antoine is travelling home on a tram, sitting next to Mme Lecouque. He reaches under the seat to stroke his dog and inadvertently strokes her fur clad shoe. Taking offence at what she sees as an assault, she slaps him hard around the face. The following day he arrives at the Lecouques' house to return the purse she left behind when she rushed from the tram. The violence here is minor; a slap around the face and the threat of a duel in the Lecouques' salon where the unlikely choice of weapon is milk poisoned with match scrapings. It carries a slight shock value which may provoke laughter as relief but it does not appear to connect with notions of excess discussed elsewhere in this chapter. Instead this farce works by establishing such a level of absurdity that the audience can laugh from a safe comic distance without feeling either empathy for the characters or any sense of moral judgement in relation to the ridiculous going on.

Whilst central absurdity is important in both *Loot* and in *Trumpets and Raspberries*, excess and transgression are far more important in controlling and/or releasing the audience's laughter response. However, the authors vary in the way they deploy excess to comic effect. In *Trumpets and Raspberries*, as in *A Slap in the Farce*, a central absurdity exists in that we are asked to accept that Agnelli has been injured, mistaken for Antonio, who is on the run, and been given plastic surgery to restore his face: and so we have two Antonios, a real one and a fake one. The most prominent examples of comic pain in the play relate closely to techniques identified earlier. For example, the character upon whom the pain is inflicted is bandaged to such an extent, with his limbs suspended by wires, that he becomes a cartoonish, unreal caricature; when the ropes and wires are moved, causing him excruciating pain, we can laugh because he appears more like a puppet than a human. Equally,

later in the play one Antonio has told Rosa to go on feeding him no matter how much he complains. This, of course, sets the scene for the other Antonio to be painfully force-fed. A number of elements are at work here. Dramatic irony comes into play as the audience knows more than either character on stage. We also see the inventive use of props as a means of supporting the comic violence, a technique that has been present throughout the history of theatrical slapstick, from the simple *batacchio* of *commedia dell'arte* to the more complex gadgets and machines of circus clown entrées and pantomime.

The use of violence in *Loot* is much more transgressive in both moral and social terms. Truscott beats Hal and although we know that the beating is performed, Hal appears to be more realistically affected than occurs elsewhere in slapstick. Still the excessive nature of the violence (including the off-stage action of the hearse exploding) aligns *Loot* with slapstick, as Innes recognises 'In *Loot*, for example, a funeral is turned into knockabout slapstick' (1992, p. 270). This later play introduces the notion of a purpose in comic violence beyond simply making the audience laugh. *Loot* is described as a black comedy or dark farce and Orton was very explicit about having chosen a comic frame to draw attention to what he regarded as some of society's failings and inconsistencies. Here we see a moral purpose in slapstick violence in that it is being used to draw the audience's attention, in particular, to the corruption of the police force at the time Orton was writing. There are also elements of excess and transgression in *Loot* that have their roots firmly in slapstick without drawing on violence or pain. This is true of the manipulation of the corpse of Hal's mother. It is clearly transgressive that Hal removes his mother's corpse from the coffin and strips it before hiding it in a wardrobe. When I last saw a production of this play at Hull Truck in 2010 the audience were divided as to whether this manipulation of the corpse was funny. There were laughs at the manhandling of the dummy representing the corpse but there were also groans and sighs. The transgression is so extreme that the established dark comic frame is not enough to free the audience to laugh. Orton was very clear that the action should be played for real rather than being hammed up for laughs. However the tendency to use a dummy rather than a naked body for the corpse reduces the shock value. If a real body were used laughter may be provoked mainly as a release of tension. Too much reality may be damaging to the comic frame but, as Orton realised, too little reality could also be damaging because the intended transgression would be reduced. This determination to present transgression whilst avoiding establishing a comic frame puts the audience in a much less

comfortable position. Without the clear signalling of a comic frame the violence is more threatening, more morally challenging and, therefore, less likely to produce laughter. In contrast the much lighter nature of farces like *Noises Off* and *Dry Rot* ensures that when characters fall through a hole in the stairs, fall off the back of a sofa whilst pretending to be a jockey, get stuck in bedrooms or cupboards and wound up in telephone cords, the audience is much more likely to laugh and may, in that laughter, be more likely to admire the skill of the performer in pulling off the slapstick action. Indeed in both these farces the nature of comic timing in relation to slapstick action comes to the fore. This occurs in *Dry Rot* when the characters have to keep banging on the hidden panel to prevent it from opening at the wrong moment or when in *Noises Off* they have to transfer the whisky bottle quickly enough between them to keep it out of Selsdon's hands. These later examples highlight the importance of the skill of the performer in slapstick, particularly in relation to timing and manipulation of props. When discussing slapstick, Staveacre stresses the importance of flaps and traps and in farce these find their equivalent in doors, windows, cupboards and secret panels.

So in terms of live performance, with reference to *commedia dell'arte*, Punch and Judy, circus, pantomime and farce, it is possible to draw together a definition of slapstick. Such a definition would be: slapstick is a mode of performance that relies on broad physical comedy. This comedy is often derived from performed violence and comic pain and is likely to involve trips, falls, beatings and throwing of items. Where violence and pain are involved, in order for the audience to be free to laugh a comic frame must be established. This can be done through the use of puppets, masks, make-up, props and sound effects. The skill of the performer in being able to carry out unusual physical feats also contributes to the emphasis of the performative nature of the act. Skill, here, may mean skill in physical manipulation, for example of props, physical contortion or clowning and comic timing. For the purposes of this book it is important to note that while violence and pain are common in slapstick, they are neither necessary nor sufficient to a definition. However, given the focus on examining the links between comedy and pain most of the slapstick examples used in this book will have pain as a central element. Having created this definition in relation to stage performance, it will be useful to consider how many of these elements are also present in screen slapstick.

Slapstick on film

There is much more writing on slapstick in film studies than there is in theatre studies, indicating the extent to which slapstick was appropriated by silent movies, where its visual clarity and light narrative touch made it an excellent vehicle for comic shorts. Cinematic slapstick established a tradition that survived the transition to sound on film and runs right through to the present; and where, unlike in theatre, there is the potential to detect and explore a direct line of influence from one film to another. Film criticism offers more useful material in addressing the nature of slapstick and the range of critical texts is much wider. Stoloff, cited in Paulus and King, offers a similar list-based definition to that offered by Staveacre 'Violent gag-based short comedies which escalated in tempo until they concluded with a crescendo of acrobatic chase and combat. These climactic battles usually included thrown projectiles (often but not necessarily pies), kicks in the rear, somersaults, belly flops and frequently concluded with all participants doused in some convenient body of water' (2010, p. 72). The identification of a set of ingredients that can be expected of slapstick is, at least, constructive, and marks a significant overlap with the elements offered in Staveacre's list.

According to Dale in *Comedy is a Man in Trouble*, slapstick is 'often considered the most outrageous of comic styles, and yet, relying as much as it does on such ineluctable forces as gravity, momentum, and bodily functions, it's the most necessarily rooted in physical actuality' (2000, p. 12). This highlights a central paradox at the heart of slapstick which has already been noted in live slapstick performance. This is that the audience is caught in a liminoid space between the real and the performed. The slapstick sequence can be both outrageous and simple in the same moment. Take for example, the moment in *Steamboat Bill Jr*, when the house falls on top of Keaton in such a way that he emerges unscathed through a convenient window frame. The set up of this particular gag is outrageous in terms of production cost and organisation, in its elaboration and in the fact that it carried a considerable element of risk. In this way it connects to notions of excess that will be explored in relation to slapstick later in this chapter. At the same time there is an element of stunning simplicity: a man stands; the front of a house succumbs to gravity. Equally the moment is caught between fiction and reality in much the same way as are the slosh scenes of pantomime. The fake house falls, narrowly missing the fictional character but in the moment of watching the audience remains aware that this fake house is constructed from real building materials and if it should hit the fictional

character it will also hit the very real body of the performer. Of course, in this example there is no performance of pain, just the threat of it. However, it remains a beautiful example of the excessive nature of slapstick. Considered in terms of narrative realism it is also absurd that a house should fall in this way. A central absurdity can be seen in many examples of slapstick, which distances events from reality. This notion of a central absurdity also highlights the connection between slapstick and farce, as explored above.

For Larry Langman, slapstick 'implies both the use of physical gags aimed against someone for laughs and a sense of unreality as a result of the broad gags and the improbability of the stunts' (1987, p. 548); so, just as it was for live slapstick, unreality is a key element of film comedy. What occurs must be so outrageous, so impossible, that the audience is never encouraged to believe that what is depicted might actually happen. Instead the audience is more likely to marvel at the skill involved, both performative and filmic, and the lack of reality is key in establishing a comic frame. Dale acknowledges the importance of this when he asserts 'that slapstick occurs anytime things go physically wrong for the hero in such a way that we know that the movie-makers are inviting us to laugh' (2000, p. 10). How then might the movie-makers signal to us that we are being invited to laugh? A range of techniques come into play – these will be explored more fully later – but it should suffice here to say that they rely on stylised performance, supporting sound effects and music and the evident impossibility of what is taking place.

Peter Kramer distinguishes between what he calls 'plain slapstick' and the work of Chaplin, Keaton and Lloyd which he suggests is set apart by 'subtlety, poetry, beauty, grace, sentiment, restraint, a carefully worked-out gag and plot structure as well as rounded characterisation' (in Karnick and Jenkins, 1995, p. 199). He also recognises that 'the term "Slapstick" came to cover various forms of violent comedy. To transform acts of wilful maliciousness and intense pain into comedy, performers had to signal clearly that their actions were mere make-believe, and constituted highly accomplished athletic routines' (p. 200). Once again we see the importance of the establishment of a performance frame which is communicated, at least in part, by the stylised performances of the actors which draw attention to their athleticism and acrobatic ability.

'Slapstick is a jesting mode, a playful treatment of the relations between cause and effect' (Trahair, 2007, p. 48). As an audience we recognise that in the real world events would not unfold as they do in slapstick films. In everyday life it is rare for the front to fall off houses or pianos

to fall out of first-floor windows. We know that in comic films links between cause and effect are established that have no basis in reality. This creative approach to the laws that usually govern our universe is part of the process by which film-makers establish a strong enough comic frame to free the audience to laugh.

Krutnik and Neale suggest that 'Slapstick is valued for the populist foundation of its aesthetic in a relentless aggression against narcissism, vanity, snobbery and pride' (1990, p. 24). In doing so, they helpfully shift the focus toward the purpose and potential of slapstick, rather than emphasising the techniques and form of its performance. This notion of purpose and slapstick's potential for offering social comment, satire and parody is one I shall return to later.

Live slapstick performance relies on the physical skill of its performers. The same is, of course, true of filmed slapstick but it is also important to consider the techniques available to cinema, both in terms of filming and editing. For example, in order to emphasise the comic frame in his films, Mack Sennett made use of a technique whereby he filmed sequences at a slow frame rate and then speeded up the frames as they passed through the projector. The results of this were the frantic, capering movements so typical of Sennett's Keystone Kops films. Another example would be the use of close-up on Keaton's deadpan expression after something catastrophic has occurred. Other techniques, such as choice of camera angle or shot or editing choices such as jump cuts will be discussed in detail later as specific films are considered.

In slapstick performance, on stage or screen, a number of common elements become apparent. Both media make use of highly-skilled performers who can emphasise the performative nature of the piece through stylisation and physical prowess. Both in live performance and on screen, the notion of establishing a comic performance frame that helps to create empathic distance exists. There are initially three key issues to consider: the ingredients of the slapstick, the techniques and performance style of slapstick and its purpose or function. Much of this holds good when we turn our attention to slapstick performance on the small rather than the large screen.

Slapstick on television

Television comedy has drawn heavily on slapstick throughout its relatively short history, in programmes such as *Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em*, *Bottom*, *The Young Ones*, *Mr Bean*, *Fawlty Towers*, *Monty Python's Flying Circus* and in animations like *Tom and Jerry* and *The Simpsons*.

It is, however, hard to find British critical material that deals with these shows in terms of slapstick content, let alone with a focus on the way in which slapstick violence is used to provoke laughter. The literature in relation to slapstick in the area of what we might term television studies comes predominantly from the US, where the incidence of slapstick in both sketch comedy and sitcoms is given some consideration. In *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture* David Marc (1997) identifies what he labels as psycho-social slapstick. He uses the term (without offering a definition of exactly what he means by it) in relation to *The Simpsons*, seeming to suggest that the slapstick of this animated series serves a social function by offering a critique of American family life. Despite the prevalence of slapstick as a mode of comedy in sketch shows and sitcoms, as acknowledged by Krutnik and Neale and David Marc, and despite the extensive list of shows involving slapstick from both sides of the Atlantic, the nature and quality of slapstick as a technique or in terms of social function has been largely ignored by TV academics. However, as will be demonstrated in later chapters, much of what has been identified above in relation to the techniques, ingredients and purpose of film and stage slapstick can also be applied to slapstick on television.

It is clear that slapstick, despite its popularity, has not attracted extended academic consideration in any single discipline. The definitions considered up to now are helpful in so far as they contribute to establishing a working definition that will be of use in this study. Slapstick is not easy to define, its techniques shift across each media. What works on screen (large or small) may not work in live performance and vice versa so there is a difference in techniques that must be acknowledged. Nonetheless there is enough commonality around the ways in which slapstick works to provoke laughter, and the socio-critical purposes it may serve whilst doing so, to justify the task undertaken here. What follows is my attempt at drawing together the various definitions and descriptions considered above into a workable and useful definition of slapstick.

The elements of slapstick

So, in order to be considered slapstick, a comedy, regardless of the media for which it is created should include all (or most) of the following: a central double act; comic pain and comic violence; falling and tripping; malicious props (the falling piano and the collapsing ladder);

throwing of objects (often but not always food, particularly pies); and stunts and acrobatics. Many of these are conveyed through the physical skill and mastery of the performer and are supported by sound effects. Beyond this we would expect to see some central absurdity, which may be enhanced by one or more of the following: a lack of reality, use of excess, or transgression. Each of these will be dealt with more fully in relation to specific examples in the following chapters but brief definitions of the scope of each of these elements may be helpful at this point.

The central double act which is found in so many slapstick performances provides the audience with an obvious source of conflict. The two halves of the double act present the viewer with one or more binary oppositions. For example if one is fat then the other is thin (Laurel and Hardy) and if one is old then the other is young (Pantalone and Arlecchino or Homer and Bart). The double nature of the partnership gives the viewer two chances to identify with the characters and the natural opposition between the two partners creates a range of opportunities for the introduction of comic pain and comic violence.

Comic pain and comic violence, which will be dealt with more fully in the next chapter, tend to go hand in hand in so far as the one is often the result of the other. Comic violence can occur when one half of a double act attacks the other or when both halves of the double act come under attack from a third party. Occasionally one half of the double act will gain an ally in the third party so that the battle becomes two against one. This is often the case, for example, in *Tom and Jerry* when Jerry is protected and assisted by Spike the dog. As well as being the result of comic violence, comic pain can occur because of an accident or some incompetence on the part of the sufferer. This is the point in slapstick at which tripping and falling come into play. The antagonist unwittingly trips and falls either over an object or his or her own feet. These trips can result in dramatic and painful falls. Sometimes comic pain occurs as the result of what I define as malicious props. Such props appear to take on a life of their own, behaving in ways that neither the viewer nor the antagonist would anticipate but which serve to make objects much more dangerous – and more animate – than they should be. A significant example of this is the house in *The Money Pit*, which will be considered in Chapter 5.

Closely related to malicious props is the throwing of objects. Traditionally the favoured projectile of slapstick comedy is the custard pie. The first custard pie was thrown at Fatty Arbuckle by Mabel Normand in *A Noise from the Deep* in 1913. Prior to that, as we have already seen, water was thrown around in pantomimes and, even earlier,

food was commonly thrown on stage in *commedia dell'arte*. Throwing objects includes an element of transgression. In everyday life we would be unlikely to get away with throwing pies or water at either our friends or our enemies. The audience may, therefore, take some vicarious pleasure in seeing the victims being hit or soaked. The nature of the throw can also be performed in such a way as to increase the audience's anticipation of the hit. This heightening or stylisation of the throwing action is closely related to the next element to be considered: stunts and acrobatics.

Stunts and acrobatics appear to have been a part of slapstick right from the start. The performer's skill in pulling off physical stunts or demonstrating levels of physical agility well beyond anything that the viewer could hope to achieve is part of what sets the slapstick performer apart. Mel Gordon identifies one early example as the 'Lazzo of Spilling No Wine' in which 'startled, Arlecchino, holding a full glass of wine, executes a complete backward somersault without spilling the wine' (1983, p. 13). Slightly later, in pantomime, Grimaldi regularly leapt through star traps, which required enormous acrobatic and athletic skill and which carried very real risk. The performer, therefore, has to be both skilled and brave. Examples from film slapstick are plentiful and include Harold Lloyd dangling from the clock face in *Safety Last*, Buster Keaton's ladder stunt in *COPS* and Charlie Chaplin's roller-skating sequence in *Modern Times*. More modern slapstick performance on film has given us Jim Carrey and Johnny Knoxville, whilst examples from television include Michael Crawford's roller-skating sequence in *Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em*. Stunts and acrobatics serve, amongst other things, to remind the audience of the level of physical skill possessed by slapstick performers.

There are sub-categories of skill in this area, of course, so one performer may be skilled in contortion, another in acrobatics, but what many of the performers of slapstick comedy share, put simply, is an ability to do things with their bodies that the watching audience could never conceive of doing with their own. A range of performers – from the early *commedia* players of Arlecchino to Chaplin (a modern day Arlecchino if ever there was one) through Michael Crawford, Rowan Atkinson, Jim Carrey and numerous other performers – have bodies that appear capable of physical feats beyond the ability of ordinary, everyday people. Indeed Alex Clayton, in his book *The Body in Hollywood Slapstick* (which focuses as the title indicates on American film comedy from the early silent greats through to the late twentieth century and which does not, unfortunately, offer a neat definition of slapstick), identifies what

he defines as the notion of 'other bodies', asking the question 'how do I know that the body of another is not entirely unlike my own – say rubbery and numb rather than fleshy and sensitive?' (2007, p. 173). Here then is one technique of slapstick performance: the performance frame encourages the viewer to consider that the performer is perhaps not affected by pain in the usual ways. There are two elements at work here. The audience is likely to be in awe of the performer's skill but equally importantly this other-worldly skill supports the notion mentioned earlier that the creator of slapstick must establish a sense of unreality in order to establish a comic frame. The skill of the performance creates a sense in the mind of the audience that the actors are in some way unreal and, once detached from their humanity, they become easier to laugh at. This point is particularly interesting in relation to the stage of my model for analysing pain (explored in Chapter 3) which relates to the ideas of empathy and body matching. Thus far we know that one of the ingredients of slapstick, the performance of seemingly outrageous pain and violence, is closely connected to one of the techniques of slapstick, a high level of physical skill. Examples of this can be found in the theatre, on television and in film so that we are able to see that the same broad technique is at work, but the notion of physical skill and distancing operates in different ways in the different media, and is supported by different ancillary elements to create the greatest effect in each setting. These will be considered later.

Sound effects

Sound effects can also make a significant contribution to the establishment of a distance from reality. This can readily be seen, for example, in *commedia dell'arte* where Arlecchino's slapstick made a resounding clatter out of proportion to the pain that it inflicted. In more modern settings we hear sound effects supporting the demonstration of violence and the infliction of pain in animation, television, film and theatre. In the episode of *Tom and Jerry* entitled 'Fit to be Tied' (1952), sound effects are used to reinforce the level of the violence. Each time any of the characters is hit by a rolled up newspaper (a weapon that Tom, Jerry and Spike all use at some point in the action) the sound effect that accompanies the blow is much louder than could really be created by a newspaper. This excessive sound effect reinforces the notion that the violence is excessive and that the effects of it or responses to it are much less than would be expected. In *The Simpsons* both Bart and Homer are frequently on the receiving end of comic violence. The depiction of this violence has its roots in earlier theatrical and filmic forms of slapstick. The

establishment of the comic frame and the emphatic lack of reality in the employment of yellow animations as the central 'human' characters are reinforced by the exaggerated nature of the violence portrayed. Homer routinely strangles Bart. As he does so his hands grasp Bart tightly round the neck. Bart is often lifted from the floor by the force of the shaking. Bart's mouth opens wide, his tongue elongates and pokes out, his eyes bulge and the only noise he can make is 'ack, ack, ack, ack'. Clearly in life this would qualify as child abuse and the child would probably suffer serious injury. In animation, however, this excessive violence, occurring as it does in a firmly established comic frame, becomes funny (in part at least) because of the excessive nature of the violence and because we know that Bart always bounces back. It helps that Homer is not only the aggressor but also frequently a victim. Indeed in the episode entitled 'How the Test was Won' (2009) Homer has allowed his insurance to lapse and, considering his situation, Homer says 'I get hurt, I get paid and man do I get hurt.' This then cues a montage of short moments in which Homer is hurt by such diverse things as a baseball to the head, falling down the stairs, being pinched by lobsters, being electrocuted and being hit by a car (season 20, episode 11). In each of these instances the moment of pain is highlighted by a sound effect: the thunk of the ball on Homer's head, a rumbling as he falls down the stairs. Usually the sounds feature a combination of percussive elements as Homer is hit and the sound of his exaggerated screaming.

The example drawn from *The Simpsons* demonstrates a number of features that we can associate with the slapstick form across all the different media being considered here. These features are absurdity, lack of reality and excess. Each of these contributes to establishing the comic frame because the clearer the absurdity and the greater the lack of reality, the more quickly the audience will understand what kind of response is being expected from them. Absurdity and lack of reality are very closely connected and are vital in freeing the audience to laugh. As the model put forward in Chapter 3 will suggest, and as has already been touched on in this chapter, if they are to laugh the audience must believe that the violence and pain are not real. If the depiction of pain is realistic and occurs within a realistic setting then the response provoked is more likely to be sympathy than laughter. The central absurdity may relate to the plot, or it may be suggested in the accretion of elements that may be acceptable individually but that snowball (as Bergson suggests) in such a way that the combination becomes unrealistic and implausible. The characters may also be absurd or behave in absurd

ways. This central absurdity contributes to establishing a lack of reality and this, in turn, may be supported through the presence of caricatures rather than realistic characters. If the characters behave in unexpected ways (as Fletcher Reede does in *Liar Liar*) then we can more readily dissociate them from reality so that our usual empathic responses seem irrelevant. The more excessive the behaviour of the characters the more likely we are to read it as unrealistic and absurd.

Excess and transgression

Slapstick is defined, in part, by notions of excess and transgression. Each of these categories can be subdivided. Thus in slapstick we encounter physical excess in the human body and excessive waste and damage in the way sets and props are treated and depicted. In terms of transgression we may consider the relatively harmless transgressions of socially accepted behaviour that occur at the level of throwing food or water at people but we must also consider more significant transgressions, those events and actions that would be criminal if they occurred in real life. Let us first consider physical excess. Many slapstick stunts and performances involve performers in situations that the audience recognises as physically impossible for the average man or woman. For example very few audience members could imagine pulling off Frank Spencer's roller-skate journey from rink to baby shop (explored in more detail in Chapter 3). Equally, very few individuals would, in reality, be able to withstand the pain inflicted on the robbers in *Home Alone* (explored in Chapter 7). In animation the examples become more extreme: Homer Simpson is able to withstand cannonball shots to the stomach and Tom (of *Tom and Jerry*) routinely swallows anvils or garden rakes without any long-lasting effects. Notions of excess do not only apply to the performers but also to elements of the set and to props. For example in season 1, episode 1 of *The Young Ones* (1982) Vyvyan has learnt that the house is to be knocked down by the council so he sets about demolishing it from the inside. His first entrance is an example of excess. He crashes through the wall to land in a seated position on the table where the other characters are sitting down to eat. The rest of the characters provide a foil to Vyvyan's excess. They barely react to Vyvyan's extreme actions, an acceptance that reinforces both the excessive nature of his behaviour and the unreality of the world they inhabit. There is further interesting blurring of the real and the fictional later in the sequence. Vyvyan attempts to destroy the living room in an entirely implausible way by head-butting the walls. In reality, the force with which he butts the walls should probably knock him out, but he appears to be entirely

unhurt. At one point he bangs his head against the wall with such force that the entire set shifts a couple of inches to one side. This constitutes an interesting meeting point of the real and the fictional for the audience. On the one hand, it demonstrates the reality of the force that Edmondson, as Vyvyan, is using. The audience might reasonably at this point assume that Edmondson is causing himself some real pain – and indeed might empathise with this pain because bumping one's head is not uncommon. Viewers can match their bodies to Edmondson's in so far as what he is doing does not demand any particular skill. On the other hand, it is unlikely that any viewer *would* do this. At the same moment that the audience is made aware of the reality of the force they are also made aware of the lack of reality of the set. This reminds the viewers of what they already know – that the set is not a real room but a facsimile made of comparatively flimsy materials. Towards the end of the episode Vyvyan smashes his head through a window without suffering any ill effect. However in order to enjoy the most excessive use of potential pain the viewer must watch both this episode and the next one. At the end of this episode the issue of whether or not the house will be demolished is resolved by a plane crashing into it. The notion is excessive (although not without some precedent in life). The crash is not seen but is indicated through sound effects of crashing and then emergency sirens. In reality such an incident would cause serious injury and death. However at the beginning of the next episode all four of the Young Ones are moving, unscathed, into a new home.

This episode echoes in some ways the destruction of the house in *Steamboat Bill Jr*. In similar ways the audience can note the clash between the fictional construct and the actual body of the performer. They may also note the excessive nature of the violence done to the house. Once again there is a combination of excess and a lack of reality.

Transgression in slapstick can take many forms. It may involve the transgression of societal norms. In everyday life people are not supposed to hit other people round the head with a cricket bat. It can also involve the transgression of expectations based on experience of the way in which the world works. We do not expect the house to collapse in *Steamboat Bill Jr* as such things do not normally occur. The transgression may simply challenge common sense (as in the latter example) but it also has the potential to parody or to offend or to challenge our perceptions about what is acceptable. The example given earlier of Homer repeatedly strangling Bart certainly contains the potential for offence. Around the world child abuse is, rightly, condemned but *The Simpsons* makes a situation which should draw our approbation funny

through cartoonish exaggeration and excessive repetition. This is an excellent example of the ways in which excess and transgression intersect and overlap on animated slapstick. Similar comments can be made about the level of violence depicted in *Tom and Jerry*.

The purpose of slapstick

Identifying what slapstick should include and even how it may be performed provides only a partial definition of the form. It is necessary also to consider the purpose of slapstick comedy. Cited in Louvish's *Stan and Ollie*, director Raymond McCarey raises an interesting notion 'there must always be a purpose behind slapstick. And the reason it will always go is because little boys will always throw snowballs at high hats. Upset dignity is eternally funny, and should be' (2001, p. 182). We know what makes us laugh in slapstick performance but McCarey raises the more complex issue of why. When somebody slips on a banana skin and falls to the floor are we simply laughing, as Bergson would have it, because in falling the individual becomes less human and more like some kind of mechanism? What the quotation from McCarey suggests, however, is that, as was the case with *commedia dell'arte*, status plays a key role in whether or not we find slapstick funny. If the person slipping on a banana skin is a high class gentleman in a top hat is that funnier than watching an urchin child slip? We may laugh when 'little boys ... throw snowballs at high hats' but would we laugh if the situation was reversed and the high hats threw snowballs at the little boys? Many examples of slapstick work because, as an audience, we find it funny to see the mighty fallen or to see dignity upset. Stan Laurel himself suggested that:

The antics of the funny men in the custard-pie comedies are an exaggeration of those which keep children in the heights of laughter. You may not see the similarity at first but on thinking it over the resemblance is very definitely there. The comedian who knocks down the policeman is the small child rebelling against authority. The custard-pie is the symbol of revolt.

(Louvish, 2001, pp. 293-4)

Here arises the suggestion that it is not only that we can all enjoy seeing dignity overthrown but that slapstick (and in particular the ubiquitous custard pie) is a safe form of rebellion. The pie-thrower knocking the helmet off the policeman does so for us all. We can feel the thrill vicariously but we are safe from any consequence. In this way slapstick

can be seen as working on several levels. As Laurel identifies, slapstick makes children laugh. There is a directness to the broad action of slapstick which even very young children can enjoy. As adults watching we may remember our own enjoyment of such scenes when we were children so that nostalgia may be at work when we enjoy slapstick, but as adults we are probably also more aware of the elements of rebellion and wish-fulfilment contained in slapstick scenes. Here are people doing things that we could not get away with in our everyday lives and there is a great deal of entertainment from watching others both suffer as victims and triumph as perpetrators.

Having considered how slapstick might be defined and what elements might contribute to a performance within that definition, it will be useful next to consider the ways in which slapstick is structured so as to create the maximum impact on the audience.

DEMO

2

Structures and Techniques of Slapstick

The dynamics of slapstick in performance and the ways in which an audience responds to that performance are clearly affected by the elements and concepts identified in the previous chapter. There is, however, another key element that needs to be considered and that might best be identified by the term 'the dynamics of slapstick'. This term refers firstly to the performance and production choices made in relation to the number of performers involved in the slapstick routines. The performance demands on the solo slapstick performer are different to those on the double act. The demands placed on an ensemble cast are different again. The variety in numbers of performers clearly provides different performance opportunities in terms of interaction with props or between performers. Obviously the nature of the audience's identification with and empathy for a performer or performers is also affected by the number and combination of performers. The dynamics of slapstick performance are also affected by what can be identified as structural elements which have a bearing on the way the slapstick performance develops. The most obvious of these are repetition, inversion, anticipation, escalation and timing. Each of these will be considered in greater depth later in the chapter, drawing on examples from a range of performances, but it will be helpful at this point to establish exactly what is meant by each of these phrases. Superficially they appear quite straightforward.

Structural elements

(A) Repetition

Repetition is clearly an important element of slapstick performance. For example there is a difference in audience response when they watch a

performer being hit over the head with a frying pan once, three times or twenty times. There is, in any sequence of repetition, an optimum number of repeats, which will be affected by such aspects as audience identification with and empathy for the character being hit or the character doing the hitting, the use of supporting sound effects and the apparent effect of the repeated impacts. As well as this kind of short order repetition which usually focuses on simple comic violence such as blows or kicks there is also a more extended version of repetition where we witness the same event or actions played out over and over again at various points in the plot. This repetition can work in different ways. Sometimes the first version is a set-up for the second. In *Home Alone* for example Kevin is shown using the technique of playing a section of a film he has been watching, in which one character threatens to kill another and gunshots are fired, to frighten off the pizza delivery boy. At this point it is a simple gag used when Kevin is not at risk. Later he uses the same technique to scare off the burglars who threaten his safety. When the second playing begins the viewer can immediately anticipate where the sequence is going because we have seen the first version. This time, however, while the gag is the same the viewer's response is likely to be different because it is now clear that Kevin is threatened and the viewer is likely to feel satisfaction at Kevin's minor triumph and his wit in re-using an earlier tactic. Repetition can also occur in the doubling of the characters. In this way we are presented with characters who are mirrors or doubles of each other and, therefore, their mishaps are doubled. In *Home Alone* this happens with the two burglars, who can be viewed as two halves of one whole. In the most violent sequences between them they can sustain far more pain than if Kevin only had one opponent.

(B) Inversion

Closely related to repetition is the notion of inversion which is identified by Bergson as involving 'an inversion of roles, and a situation which recoils on the head of its author' (2005, p. 47). Such inversions occur when we see victims becoming aggressors or when children scold their parents. Bergson also suggests that inversion is at work when a character is caught in a trap of his or her own making. It could also be suggested that inversion is at work when a character, for whatever reason, begins to behave in a way which runs counter to their established character. The whole plot of *Liar Liar* revolves around such an inversion when inveterate liar Fletcher Reede is forced by his son's birthday wish to tell nothing but the truth even when he knows that telling the truth will cause him considerable difficulties.

(C) Anticipation

The use of repetition and the inversion of repetition clearly contributes to the other two elements identified: anticipation and escalation. Anticipation can, of course, be gratified or unfulfilled. When a character has fallen down two sets of stairs and approaches a third the audience inevitably has the expectation that the character may fall again. There is a rise in tension as the character approaches the top of the stairs. As the character reaches the stairs the subsequent action may take a variety of paths. The character may fall for a third time in which case the anticipation is gratified and the audience may feel a double swell of superiority, firstly because they saw what was coming and secondly because they believe they would never be stupid enough to fall down three sets of stairs. If the character makes it down the stairs safely then the anticipation is not met. Whether the audience is disappointed by this change in the pattern of events is likely to depend on their relationship with the character who keeps falling. If they empathise with him they may feel glad that he is not hurt any further. If they do not empathise then they may feel cheated out of a further laugh, particularly if the preceding falls have been well executed. However, anticipation is not always so black and white and perhaps the greatest potential for anticipation lies in its more complex deployments. If we return to the potential faller at the top of the stairs it is not actually as simple as suggested above. Falling or not falling are only two options. It is also possible that audience expectations can be toyed with. He may appear to be in control of his passage down the stairs and then fall in an unexpected way which is markedly different to the previous falls. Another possibility is that he does not fall but that some other, unanticipated, mishap befalls him. The handling of anticipation by the director and the performer (or in some forms the scriptwriter) makes a significant contribution to the dynamics of any slapstick performance.

(D) Escalation

Escalation comes about when the elements of repetition and anticipation are combined. The notion is identified by Bergson as a snowball and Milner Davis takes up this notion in relation to farce describing a train of events as 'a rolling ball which, from small beginnings, grows in size and speed to envelop every bystander in its final explosion and disintegration' (1978, p. 71). In terms of slapstick performance this device can work within a small unit of the structure in a way that is reminiscent of the *lazzi* of *commedia dell'arte*. In this way a short sequence of physical

activity may snowball very quickly leading to a frenzy of activity. Escalation as a device may also work as a larger structural feature which encompasses the plot of the whole performance piece. The example Milner Davis gives is Labiche's *An Italian Straw Hat* where the entire plot involves an ever-growing number of people chasing around in search of the straw hat. Where escalation is to work as a structural device for a whole performance it must be closely linked to a key aspect of the plot, particularly where the plot incorporates a quest or chase.

(E) Timing

The notion of timing as a vital element of comedy is not new. Much of the existing literature focuses on the timing of spoken jokes (see Attardo and Pickering, 2011; and Carroll, 1991). Some ideas about the timing of spoken humour can also be applied to visual and physical humour, such as the use of the pause, but there are also other techniques of timing at play in physical comedy which may not have their equivalent in verbal humour. There are, therefore, a number of features which need to be considered in examining the ways in which timing can be used to enhance the delivery and performance of comedy. It is also important to consider why timing might be used to control the laughter response that the performer desires from the audience. In the first place, timing can be used to increase the laughter response by using a pause that signals that the punch-line or punch-action is about to be delivered. The pause increases the tension and anticipation felt by the audience and so when the tension is released by the punch line or action then the laughter is likely to be longer, louder, or both. Timing can also be used to create space for laughter as Long recognises in his discussion of the performance of Greek comedy in his article in *The Classical World* 'Good comedians learn to "hold" during the audience's laughter and not to "walk through it"' (1976, p. 7). Timing can clearly serve two functions, firstly to signal to the audience that laughter is expected and secondly to ride the laughter so that the audience achieves full release and the performer does not try to move to the next laugh too soon. Some of the ways in which timing can be controlled seem to have been passed among performers in what might be identified as an oral tradition in which one performer having observed another gives hints or tips in order to help them time the line or action better. Wright identifies a range of devices in *Why is that so Funny?* (2006), some of which will be useful here. He recognises the fixed point, the comic stop and the drop. For Wright, these techniques (amongst others) are a form of punctuation; a way of controlling the rhythm of the scene as it is played.

The fixed point can be used to make a moment important. When performing using a fixed point the actor stops briefly in the course of the action. For example a performer raising his arm to hit his partner may stop the movement of his arm (however briefly) before following through with the punch. This momentary pause signals to the audience, drawing their attention more fixedly to what is about to follow. This kind of adjustment to timing also allows the performer to remain firmly within the narrative that has been established whilst other techniques such as the double-take break the performance frame. The comic 'stop' can be seen as a more exaggerated form of the fixed point. Wright defines it as 'your body twitches in a sudden short jolt as if you'd just experience an electric shock, and then you recover, without comment' (2006, p. 148). Chaplin uses a series of such stops when he reacts to the increasing speed of the conveyor belt in *Modern Times*. As with the fixed point the performer remains within the narrative frame because, whilst the 'stop' is too exaggerated to be read as real, the performer makes no acknowledgment to the audience of what has happened. On the other hand, comic performers (particularly but not exclusively clowns) make use of the 'drop' to break the narrative of the performance to allow them to comment on what is occurring. For Wright, the 'drop' is 'an abrupt abandonment of everything about the scene. It's the strongest interruption possible in an action' (2006, p. 149). The notion of an excessive break in the action fits well with slapstick which routinely makes use of excess action and inaction to create humour. As narrative is not usually the dominant force in slapstick, its interruption is tolerable and even pleasurable to the audience. If the drop allows the performer to make a strong connection to the audience and to comment on what has been occurring then this is likely to be a perfectly acceptable substitute for a furtherance of the narrative. Drops can occur before moments of comic violence or accidents that are likely to result in pain. For example in a silent film the performer may look straight to camera or make a comment about the train or car or plank that is about to hit them. In a performance that has not established a comic frame such a break would make the violence even more shocking. In a comedy, the performer's recognition of what is to happen to them readies the audience. The sense of anticipation is increased and then the release into laughter is stronger and sweeter.

The other focus of this chapter, the contribution made to the dynamics of slapstick by the number of performers involved is an area that has not been explored in any theoretical or conceptual depth elsewhere.

The double act could be argued as the central performance trope of slapstick and so I will begin there and move on to consider the differing impacts of solo performers or ensembles later in the chapter.

Double acts

As was the case with the elements of slapstick comedy considered in the previous chapter, very little critical analysis has been written about double acts. It is possible to find works such as Louvish's *Stan and Ollie: The Roots of Comedy* but the focus in such books is on exploring the off-screen relationship between the two performers and on describing the onscreen antics of the duo. This is useful in that, in combination with the films themselves, we are able even at some historical distance to understand exactly what went on in performance with the book often giving insights into how sketches were developed. However the lack of definition and discussion as to what constitutes a double act and the dearth of any analysis as to how they appeal to an audience means that once again we are in the position of needing to establish what a double act is, how it works and why it appears to have such a universal application in slapstick comedy. That is not to suggest that all slapstick comedy involves a double act but it is certainly true of the majority of slapstick performances from Greek comedy onwards. Fundamentally, the double act reflects the binary nature of dramatic structure which impels its narrative.

In order to establish the specific form of a double act, it will be helpful to consider a range of examples drawn from a range of historical periods and performance styles. Here I will explore the oppositions established and the techniques of performance used by such diverse pairings as Dionysus and Xanthius in *The Frogs*, Pantalone and Arlecchino and zanni pairings in *commedia dell'arte*, the Ugly Sisters of pantomime, Alf and Fred in John Chapman's *Dry Rot*, Laurel and Hardy, Morecambe and Wise on television, and, in animation, Tom and Jerry.

This section will provide an overview of elements such as physical similarity and difference, status, age and wealth. It will, therefore, enable a consideration of the nature of different double acts. In some ways there is no such thing as a typical double act as is evidenced by the great variation in performance styles and intentions of the various pairings to be found across theatre, film and television.

Taking Dionysus and Xanthius as our starting point, a range of contrasts between the pair are immediately evident. Dionysus is master to Xanthius so a status differential is established even though it

immediately becomes clear that Xanthius may well be able to get the upper hand. Therefore we are presented with a high status/low status contrast which is repeatedly challenged by Xanthius' ability to get the better of his master. This ability is clear to the audience in the opening scene as Xanthius rides the donkey while Dionysus walks. They are a partnership in a constant state of competition. As Sommerstein recognises 'this first half of the play can be seen as a contest between Dionysus and Xanthius, in which, ... the tough physical type defeats the soft (pseudo-) intellectual type' (1996, p. 13). Even this early in the theatrical history of the double act, the notion of contrasting types is central to the way they perform. This double act then offers several contrasts in terms of physicality, status and quick-wittedness. Importantly it also provides us with an example of a particular kind of double act – the sparring double act in which the two halves of the pair are in constant competition.

The status distinction between Pantalone and Arlecchino, another sparring double act, is much clearer. Once again (echoing Dionysus and Xanthius) we are presented with a master-servant duo but the oppositions are multiple here. Pantalone has higher status than Arlecchino both in terms of social standing and in terms of wealth. He is also more intelligent than Arlecchino. On the other hand, he is old and physically much more limited than his younger, more acrobatic servant. This balancing of strengths and weaknesses allows for a wider variety of interactions between the two halves of the duo. The pairs of *zanni* to be found in a range of *commedia* scenarios can work either as a sparring duo in competition for a girl, a job or food or they can work as a supportive double act in which they help each other against an external aggressor or victim.

In pantomime the cross-dressing pairing of the Ugly Sisters as found in *Cinderella* blurs the boundaries between sparring and supportive partnerships. Theirs is not a particularly violent partnership but they do provide 'a physical and character contrast: perhaps one is tall, thin and rather arch while the other is short, fat and whiney. They display their nastiness quite openly to the audience with the naughty glee of evil children, and are proud to show off their spitefulness and greed' (Bicat et al., 2004, p. 21). Their interaction relies heavily on repetition, timing and physical comedy. There are times when their nastiness is particularly clear and they work together against the shared enemy, Cinderella. Whenever they get the opportunity they are nasty to Cinderella but, given the audience's sympathy with Cinderella, this is unlikely to be funny. What is funnier is when the sisters turn on each other. Usually

in act one they have a scene in which they work together to prepare themselves for the ball. This tends to involve such actions as dressing, applying make-up and having their hair done. This scene fits within the slosh tradition because of its potential for causing a mess. Here the mess is made and the comedy arises from their competitive attempts to beautify themselves. However, where Prince Charming is concerned they become opponents, each trying to win the man. This fluidity of interaction demonstrates the potential complexity of double acts and this complexity may well contribute to the ongoing presence and popularity of double acts, particularly in popular performance modes, an issue to be considered much further on in this book.

In his book *Modern British Farce*, Leslie Smith identifies the double act as a common trope used by writers of farce. According to Smith a range of farces make use of the double act and 'its cross-talk routines, the physical misadventures of the characters, elaborate pieces of comic business or "lazzi", the use of catch-phrases and stereotype characters' (1989, p. 175). It appears more common in farce for the double act to work together rather than against each other. This is certainly the case in John Chapman's *Dry Rot* where the roles of Alf and Fred, played in the original Whitehall production by Brian Rix and John Slater, are reminiscent of a music hall double act. They work together as partners in their scheme to fix the horse race and make their fortunes.

A greater level of complexity can be found in the duo of Laurel and Hardy. They appear to be partners, often working to a common goal, suggesting that they might constitute a supportive double act. However, a number of oppositions are immediately apparent – the most obvious of them physical. Laurel is small and slim in comparison to Hardy's girth. This physical incongruity is echoed in the status interactions between the pair. Laurel often lets Hardy down, resulting in his trademark tearful look and head-scratching whilst Hardy rants about the 'fine mess' he has been 'gotten into'. This incompetence on Laurel's part, whilst unintentional, contributes to the sparring element between the two.

The double act performed by Morecambe and Wise moves fluidly between sparring and supportiveness both in terms of verbal comedy and gentle slapstick. Many of their exchanges in front of the curtain are strongly reminiscent of music hall and vaudeville double acts. Physically, as was the case with Laurel and Hardy, they are strikingly different. Eric Morecambe towered above Ernie Wise. In terms of status Wise's little man is constantly asserting his greater intellect and understanding of how the world and social interaction works. He is usually knowledgeable about their guests whilst Morecambe often plays

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the fool, mistaking one guest for another or forgetting what they are famous for. In his biography, Graham McCann identifies the contrast between the two as follows: 'Eric was hot, Ernie was cold. Eric was supple, Ernie was stiff. Eric was droll, Ernie was dour. Eric was playful with language, Ernie was respectful of it' (1999, p. 13). McCann's list goes on, reinforcing the importance of difference between the two halves of a double act. In some sketches they are in competition for the attention of their star guest or an attractive woman. In series 2, episode 1 (1969) Wise claims to be ill so that he can request a home visit from his attractive female doctor. Once she is in their flat Morecambe and Wise compete for her attention. Each tries to get her to touch them with Wise achieving most success. Here they are clearly sparring but the slapstick violence is relatively gentle, used as a punctuation or structural device and as a demonstration of status rather than being intended to depict any high level of comic pain. In perhaps one of the most famous physical comedy routines of all time, the breakfast sketch, they operate as a supportive double act where the emphasis is not on pain and violence but on the demonstration of skill and timing. One of the joys of watching Morecambe and Wise is the fluidity with which their double act shifts from supportive to sparring and back again.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries our screens were and are populated by other sparring double acts, such as Tom and Jerry. In episode after episode Tom tries to capture and eat Jerry who eludes him but not before both of them have been hurt in a variety of slapstick ways which will be further explored later. The physical opposition in this pairing is expressed through the fact that they belong to different species that are natural enemies. The construction of the duo in animation allows Tom to be established as larger and potentially physically dominant but he is also less quick-witted than his much smaller opponent. Tom should have the higher status in this pairing: the territory they inhabit is his home and he is charged with the task of keeping it mouse-free. However, his inability to catch and kill Jerry blurs the status distinction. There are moments in particular episodes where Jerry gets the upper hand and Tom is shown waiting on or attending to Jerry. For example in 'Fit to be Tied' Jerry has done a favour for Spike ensuring that Spike will come to rescue him from Tom every time he rings a bell. We then see a scene in which Jerry lies in bed whilst Tom brings a tray laden with different plates of cheese. If Tom makes any move to hurt Jerry then Jerry reaches for the bell. At this point in the action Jerry is clearly higher in status but only by virtue of his association with Spike. There are also times in the same episode where Tom and Spike function

as a sparring double act. Spike is larger and stronger and it is only when he is tied up near his kennel that Tom can attack him with any degree of success. Whilst Tom and Spike and Tom and Jerry are always sparring, Spike and Jerry function as a supportive double act although the support flows mainly from the larger, stronger Spike to the smaller, weaker Jerry.

Double acts, therefore, may be sparring or supportive. Whichever they are, the audience expects to see some contrast between the two personae whether the contrast relates to status, wealth, intelligence or physical attributes. The double acts described above could also be defined as constant. The same pairing is maintained throughout the performance and, in many cases, across a number of performances. Within this constant pairing the duo may or may not sustain the same roles (for example victim and aggressor) but they appear to be engaged in a mutual relationship whether it is supportive or conflictual. With Laurel and Hardy the roles remain fairly constant, Hardy always has the upper hand and Laurel is always incompetent. In Tom and Jerry the roles are constantly shifting. First Tom is in the ascendant, then Jerry, but whichever is winning the two cannot exist without each other.

Serial double acts

It is also possible to identify what might be termed serial double acts. Mr Punch provides us with a good example of this kind of double act. The performance demands of a single puppeteer working within a small booth dictate that there can rarely be more than two puppets on stage. Indeed there can only be more than two if the third is either dead or being held by one of the others. As a result the audience is presented with a series of double acts: Punch and Judy, Punch and the baby, Punch and the policeman, Punch and the Hangman. Serial double acts are almost always sparring or conflictual. Punch holds the role of aggressor and a series of victims come before him to be despatched.

Whether the double act is constant or serial has a significant impact on the way the audience engages with the performers and on the way in which the audience responds to them. With a constant pairing it is likely that the audience will take sides but that different audience members will side with different halves of the duo. This engagement is dependent on which half of the performing duo the audience member feels most sympathy for or which they identify most with. With a serial double act the ever-changing nature of the opponent means that the audience is most likely to engage with and be on the side of the character who is most before them. In a Punch and Judy show the audience

engages most with Mr Punch because he is a more or less constant presence. Many of the puppets engage in direct address to the audience giving them the chance to attract our sympathy but Mr Punch addresses the audience again and again, giving him a repeated opportunity to appeal to them. This use of direct address is one technique by which live performers can attract the audience's fellow feeling. This is the case in *commedia dell'arte*, Punch and Judy and pantomime. Film and television have an equivalent device in the direct look to camera.

The physical make-up of the double act, in terms of presenting visual contrasts, relates to what Ken Dodd described as the 'perfect symmetry of comic incongruity' (in Whitehead, 2007, p. 7). He was describing Laurel and Hardy but the phrase is useful, highlighting as it does the importance of incongruity in the presentation of the double act. The incongruity must be carefully balanced (hence the notion of perfect symmetry). The pair must be different enough to present a contrast without being so dissimilar that we cannot believe they would form a partnership. Most commonly in live partnerships (as opposed to puppets or animation) the two halves of the partnership are male. This is particularly the case when the partnership incorporates physically violent slapstick as part of the act. The one opposition that is rarely seen therefore is that of gender. The notion of a man causing pain to a woman perhaps contains too many echoes of domestic abuse to be amusing unless the distancing frame is strong enough. So Punch can beat Judy with relative impunity because they are not live performers.

Often double acts comprise of 'two performers, one usually presenting the funny lines while the other acts as his straight man, feed or stooge' (Harrison, 1993, p. 83). This use of the funny man/straight man pairing is most apparent in pairings relying on verbal comedy. In physical comedy the straight man role is expressed through the higher status performer, the one who is more physically in control. Often this is the aggressor who takes out his anger or frustration on his partner. In a physical pairing, the latter fulfils the role of stooge by taking the beatings which rain down on him.

So the dynamics of the double act are as follows. Two performers form a sparring or supportive duo, working together once or repeatedly. Usually the double act forms around an opposition or oppositions which may be physical, status-related or intellectual. Within the partnership one of the duo may take on the comedy role whilst the other operates as a stooge or straight man. What remains to be explored is what purpose the double act may serve and why it is so popular.

Double act as metaphor

Tony Whitehead suggests that 'the classic double act of straight man and clown is also predicated on the conflict between the realism of the world as we know it (conformity or pragmatism) and the fantasy of the world as we would like it to be (anarchy or wish-fulfilment)' (2007, p. 7). This is an interesting suggestion that raises the notion that comic double acts operate not only on the level of physical actuality which is highlighted by the physical oppositions to be seen in so many double acts but that they also operate as a metaphor through which the audience can be presented with a broader exploration of the world in which they live. To pursue this idea would lead us to see Hardy as a representative of the realism of the world. He, to take Whitehead's terms, is a conformist, a pragmatist; he wishes to fulfil whatever task the duo is attempting to undertake and he is infuriated by Laurel's incompetence. On the other hand, Laurel represents fantasy. His anarchy is gentle but he operates in a daydream world which does not connect very well with the real world inhabited by Hardy, hence the disjunction in their actions. For the viewer this provides the opportunity for a range of responses and these responses will be related to the way in which the viewer interacts with the real world and how satisfied they are with their usual pattern of response. So the pragmatist viewer will sympathise with Hardy and his frustration; the pragmatist viewer who wishes life were less routine may feel some desire to share in the world view represented by Laurel. Those who are fantasists but who wish to be more effective will recognise themselves in Laurel but may be inclined to empathise with Hardy's response. The content fantasist will enjoy Laurel's unintentional anarchy and may take pleasure in seeing the anger roused in Hardy. Equally the metaphor could be extended from conformist and anarchist to parent and child. Many double acts present the anarchist character as a rebellious child, less gentle than Stan Laurel, and taking an active pleasure in upsetting the carefully laid plans of the parent figure. Stott also considers the double act as representative of more than its bodily physicality suggests. Early in his consideration of comedy he asserts that 'the theme of comedy as a divided and doubled experience is even embodied for us in the double act, a staple of comic performance since the appearance of Dionysus and his servant Xanthius in *The Frogs* (405 BC). Double acts present a perfect embodiment of the uneasy doubling and bifocal perceptions of comedy' (2005, p. 8). Comedy is about difference. The humour lies in the friction to be found in conflict; in the differences in attitudes and outlooks of the two halves of a double act. This can readily be seen in the *commedia dell'arte*

double act of Pantalone and Arlecchino who represent opposing classes. Pantalone is the wealthy merchant; Arlecchino his poor servant. This presents plenty of opportunity for comic violence but the two also function as representatives of the battle between the classes. The double act presents the audience with two different views of the world, giving the audience twice the opportunity to find something to laugh at or with.

Solo slapstick performers

Solo performers create a different dynamic. The viewer has only one point of focus, which establishes a much clearer response to the performance of comic pain and violence, based largely on the extent to which the viewer empathises with the performer. If, as is usually the case with Chaplin, the viewer feels some sympathy for the protagonist as he struggles through life, then pain inflicted on Chaplin is likely to be viewed sympathetically and is less likely to provoke laughter. On the other hand, when Chaplin strikes a blow at his opponent the viewer is more likely to laugh because we feel that he is either defending himself or striking a blow on behalf of the oppressed. For example in *The Great Dictator* (a film in which Chaplin plays both the victim, the Jewish barber and the aggressor, Adenoid Hynkel) in one short sequence the barber's love interest, Hannah, is leaning out of a window wielding a heavy frying pan. She is attempting to hit a soldier but the Jewish barber is perilously close. The first strike is played quite straight as she hits the soldier on the back of the head to stop him punching the barber. In real life such a blow would knock him out but its fictional nature is highlighted by the accompanying sound effects, a metallic striking sound followed by an upward glissando. The second strike lands on the barber in error and the comic nature of the violence is emphasised by the dance sequence which follows. The barber staggers from the blow and at that moment dance music begins and the barber half staggers, half dances up and down the street. This is an unusually extended response to comic violence and is an opportunity for Chaplin to shine as a solo performer. The sequence does not rely on interaction but on Chaplin's physical control and skill as a dancer. He eventually staggers back towards the soldier, positioned beneath the window where Hannah still waits with her frying pan. The soldier swings to hit the barber, fails to make contact and is swung fully round by the force of his own punch. He comes to rest under the window and is hit for the second time. Once again he should be knocked out but the comic frame dictates that the violence cannot have any real consequence. He staggers towards

the barber, arms outstretched like a zombie. The barber (who is still staggering himself) supports the soldier, sits him on the pavement and then lies him down. In this example the violence is provided by another character who does not normally occupy the role of aggressor in the film's narrative. The soldier's contribution to the scene is minor and so the audience's focus is on the solo performer.

Solo performers require either another performer as a temporary partner, as in the example above, or some other interaction to provide the element of opposition required for comic violence to take place. In some instances a solo performer will make use of props and objects either intentionally or unintentionally as a source of pain. In *Liar Liar* the solo performer Carrey, playing the role of Fletcher Reede, deliberately inflicts pain on himself. In an attempt to stop himself telling the truth in a situation where a lie would serve him better, he beats himself up in the washroom. In this example the solo performer is both victim and aggressor. He inflicts the pain and suffers it. I would argue that this frees the audience to laugh at what would otherwise strike us as excruciating. He rubs soap into his eyes. Instinctive empathy alerts us to how painful this must be. However, the fact that he has done this to himself and that he has done it to stop himself telling the truth when telling the truth is normally considered virtuous, blocks this empathy. Morally perhaps the viewer feels Reede deserves to be in pain. The comic frame is highlighted by the cartoon-like 'owee' which is spoken as a response to banging his head against the wall whilst he tries to think. It is also supported by the timing of his blows and actions with the non-diegetic soundtrack which accompanies his actions. Even more dramatically than Chaplin's staggering dance in *The Great Dictator*, Carrey's performance in this scene is a solo tour de force in which objects are appropriated by the performer as ways of inflicting pain on himself as he attempts to do what he defines as 'kicking [his] ass'.

Whilst Carrey deliberately manipulates objects to cause pain to himself, Leslie Nielson as the incompetent Lt Frank Drebin in *Naked Gun 2 ½*, uses objects apparently unwittingly to cause pain to innocent and undeserving victims. The opening sequence of the film establishes very swiftly the kind of incompetence that is Drebin's trademark throughout the film. Rather like Mr Punch hundreds of years earlier, Drebin has a series of victims and the first of these is the President's wife Barbara Bush. As the film opens a presidential dinner is about to take place and Drebin is one of the guests. The President and Mrs Bush are announced and make their entrance down a staircase and along a corridor. As they walk, Drebin comes into the corridor; he steps through a door, swinging

it so wide open that Mrs Bush is knocked flat onto her back. Drebin is unaware of what he has done. It is a common feature of this film that the viewer sees Drebin foregrounded whilst the effects of his incompetence play out for the audience in the background. This sequence escalates with Mrs Bush as the primary victim. As they reach the dinner table, Drebin moves the chair from behind her to offer it to an attractive young woman. Mrs Bush falls to the floor. Drebin's eyes follow the attractive young woman and as she passes Mrs Bush, he realises that she has fallen and moves to help her. Mrs Bush, by this point, is on her hands and knees on the floor, attempting to get up. Drebin grabs her round the waist and tries to yank her to her feet, hitting her head repeatedly on the underside of the table. By this early point in the film the audience has been primed to expect Drebin's incompetence. Drebin clearly causes Mrs Bush pain, without ever realising that he has done so. However, the consequences of the blows and falls are never as serious as they should be in real life. We are told of serious consequences of his incompetence which have happened off-screen. He is being honoured for having achieved 1000 drug dealer kills (not arrests) but he says 'in all honesty the last two I backed over with my car ... luckily they turned out to be drug dealers'. The serious nature of this consequence would be less funny if viewed but the comedy is heightened by the fact that it is narrated by Drebin himself who appears to feel no remorse or guilt. From this point, as Drebin starts to tackle the lobster that has been served for dinner the scene begins to escalate in terms of the number and frequency of the incidents he unwittingly triggers (including landing a lemon in Winnie Mandela's hat, pinching the breast of the woman next to him with an over-sized lobster claw). The climax of the sequence is the final injury to Mrs Bush. In trying to force a lobster claw apart to get at the meat Drebin's right hand swings out and smacks Mrs Bush in the face. She is knocked off her chair, flying backwards until only her feet remain in shot above the level of the table.

Much later in the film Drebin, again like Punch, finds another victim. However, unlike Punch, Drebin has no idea that he is causing harm to anyone. In this later sequence Drebin and another character, Dr Meinheimer, are being held hostage. Drebin is tied to some metal shelving and tries to use the metal edge to cut through the ropes around his wrists. As he rubs the rope against the frame it starts to shake making the items on it move around. As a result of this a series of objects fall onto Meinheimer's head. This is a very clear example of repetition being used to build audience expectation. Meinheimer is hit by a baseball bat, six baseballs, pool balls, four horseshoes, a skittle, a bowling ball,

oil, followed by the oil can, polystyrene pieces and, finally, an anvil. Each of the heavy objects is a simple repetition. At the point that the polystyrene pieces fall there is an inversion. After a pattern of heavy objects something light falls which does not cause physical pain. The anvil is a return to the previous pattern and constitutes the finale both by being the heaviest object to fall and by being the one that actually knocks Meinheimer out. Throughout this sequence Drebin is unaware of the damage he is causing. He is clown-like in his failure to control his environment. We laugh at his ineptitude but are not inclined to make any moral judgement because he never intends to cause the pain he does. Each sequence in the film in which another character is injured by Drebin contributes to a structural pattern of repetition and escalation which is inverted by his final act of incompetence. At the end of the film the bomb is about to explode. Drebin has tried to disarm it and has failed. He grabs his girlfriend's hand and runs around the bomb to escape. As he does so he trips on an electricity cable, pulling the plug from the socket. This action disarms the bomb with a second left to detonation. The incompetent protagonist becomes an unwitting hero. We are able to make the transition to celebrating his success because his clumsiness is in some way endearing when allied to the knowledge that he never means to do any harm.

Solo slapstick performers tend to generate a very simple set of responses in the audience. Our attention is on them throughout and in both the films considered here the plot signals very clearly whether we are expected to judge the protagonist or whether we are able to laugh at them. We can laugh at Fletcher Reede's self-inflicted pain because he is an inveterate liar and normal social codes of behaviour indicate that lying is wrong. The physical skill of Carrey's performance also distances us from the pain, reminding us of its performative nature. A similar distancing effect is achieved in *Naked Gun 2 ½* by both the number of incidents triggered by Drebin and by their random and absurd quality.

Ensemble slapstick performers

Ensemble slapstick performance presents a more complex situation for an audience to respond to. A larger cast of characters who may pass the roles of aggressor and victim amongst them creates a more complex web of relationships, sympathies and judgements. In addition to this not all slapstick ensembles are formed in the same way. If we take the Three Stooges, for example, then the ensemble is made up of three consistent performers. From 1934 until 1946 the Three Stooges were Moe Howard,

Jerome 'Curly' Howard and Larry Fine. In 1946 when Curly had a stroke he was replaced by Shemp Howard who had earlier performed with Moe and Larry. This consistency of performers (between 1934 and 1946 the trio made 98 films) ensured a fluency of performance and an excellent understanding of timing and performance skills. This kind of ensemble closely mirrors the dynamic of the consistent double act. The trio tend to follow a pattern of roles in which Moe plays the character with the highest status and is usually the performer who inflicts most pain on the other characters. Larry slots into the middle position in which he is less frequently on the receiving end of Moe's violence and occasionally gets to inflict pain himself. The lowest status role is taken by either Shemp or Curly. Whichever of these two is present usually receives the lion's share of the blows. *Disorder in the Court* (1936) places the three performers in court as witnesses to a murder. As the film opens they are playing a game to pass the time and, as they play, Moe is seen dishing out blows, first to Curly and then to Larry. The depiction of pain and violence throughout this short film relies on status interaction and the manipulation of props while each blow is supported by an exaggerated sound effect. For example, the three men re-enact the murder, which involves Curly (the lowest status) being cast as the murder victim whilst Moe is the murderer. Moe puts Curly's head into a letter press and winds it down. When the wheel un-spins, it flies up into the air and comes down, hitting Moe on the head. The blow is accompanied by a sound effect and we have a close up on Moe's face to reinforce his response. As the action moves on the three are closely involved in the slapstick violence that ensues. The lawyer hands Curly a gun (with the assurance that it is not loaded) to prove that the trigger is too rusty for the accused woman to have fired the gun. Curly eventually pulls the trigger and shoots the lawyer on his ample bottom with his second shot. The third shot fires off the clerk's toupee. A close-up shows a steaming groove scored into his forehead by the bullet. That there are three lead performers facilitates a greater range of violent acts because the pain is divided up amongst them so that sequences can be sustained for longer. Additionally they can take it in turns to mete out violence to other characters. Curly, who rarely gets the chance to hurt Moe or Larry hits a whole row of jury members on the head with a hammer while trying to hit a parrot which is, incongruously, flying loose in the court-room.

The later film *Sing a Song of Six Pants* (1947) also shows the advantage of having three lead performers working as an ensemble. The plot of this film involves a bank robber and his two side-kicks arriving at the Three Stooges' laundry and alteration shop to try to get back a safe combination which has accidentally fallen into the hands of Moe,

Larry and Shemp. It is clear that a fight will result and the fact that the boys have three opponents sets up a sequence in which Moe, Larry and Shemp each take on, and ultimately beat, one of the would-be bank robbers. Three fights, which are intercut so that the viewer sees moments from each in turn, facilitate a greater range of violence than would otherwise be possible. The extended sequence begins with some very mild violence between Shemp and Terry Hagan, the bank robber. Hagan is wearing a false beard which Shemp pulls away and allows to ping back onto Terry's face. Shemp then gets the beard and puts it on his own face prompting Terry to kick him up the backside and to ping the beard on him. The level of pain involved here is very minor. The camera cuts to Larry who kicks his robber in the stomach. The robber is virtually knocked out by the kick. The camera then cuts to Moe who is being held by the third robber who is rifling through Moe's pockets. Moe reacts as if he is being tickled. This demonstrates how with three performers the levels of violence and levels of consequence can be varied rapidly throughout an extended sequence in a way that would be much harder to achieve with a duo or a solo performer. Moe then pulls a trick move which results in him hitting the robber on the head. The blow is emphasised by a hollow sound effect. The robber pitches forward and as he falls Moe kicks him. The robber falls onto the heated iron press and Moe pulls it down on his head. We see great quantities of steam and hear sound effects of steam. The camera cuts to Larry who is bending over his thug who is knocked out. Larry then comes into shot with Moe. The two men then work together on Moe's robber. Larry picks up a hot iron and presses it onto the robber's bottom while Moe continues to press his head. Eventually the camera cuts to Shemp and Terry Hagan. In an interesting juxtaposition Shemp, the lowest status of his trio, takes on Hagan, the highest status of his. Hagan has hung Shemp on a coat rack which we soon realise revolves. The short sequence between the two of them relies on repetition and variation. Terry slaps Shemp who cries out in pain and swings away from him as the rack revolves. As he swings back round, arms outstretched, his fist connects with Terry, hitting him. Terry then hits him back the other way, a repetition with a minor variation, resulting in Terry being hit again. The camera then cuts back to Moe and Larry to show Moe knocking the robber out. The switch of focus from Shemp to Moe and Larry elongates the sequence of hitting and spinning. When we cut back to Shemp he is hit a third time but this time as he swings back round his feet are outstretched so he kicks Terry in the face, knocking him out. The trio emerge triumphant but the audience is left with the impression that whilst Moe and Larry seemed to know exactly what they were

doing, Shemp may well have triumphed more by luck than judgement. Having an ensemble performance of violence creates the opportunity for a greater range of violence and for a greater range of cuts from one fight to another which serves to extend the narrative and to increase the audience's anticipation. The trios in the Three Stooges films work as a unit and the substitution of Shemp Howard for Curly Howard only happened because Curly was too ill to continue. The fact that Shemp had worked with Moe and Larry years before ensured that the high level of understanding and complicity necessary for the timing of slapstick work was sustained.

The dynamic in another slapstick ensemble, the Crazy Gang, offers a very different viewing proposition, having been formed by the merging of three pre-existing double acts: Bud Flanagan and Chesney Allen, Jimmy Nervo and Teddy Knox, Charlie Naughton and Jimmy Gold. As well as performing together live on stage the Crazy Gang made five films between 1937 and 1958. *The Frozen Limits* (1939) is used here to provide an example of the opportunities that arose from having six performers working together. For the most part the gang rely on fairly conventional slapstick routines and obvious status patterns. Charlie Naughton, the smallest of the group, is routinely the performer who ends up beaten by the rest. The gang go to the Yukon in search of gold. As part of the plot the gang, who had been trying to make a living back home as performers with the name of the Wonder Boys, put on a play for the men who have rushed to Red Gulch to find gold. During the play a group of men come in to lynch them which sets off a chase sequence. The possibilities of a chase sequence with six targets are seemingly endless and they work as a team to try to overcome their opponents. However, one of the more successful comic pain routines comes earlier in the action and relies on the technique of repetition and variation. The men are asleep in their bunks. The first of them is woken, sits up and bangs his head. The same happens to the next four men, establishing a pattern of repetition and building audience anticipation. When the final man is woken the expectation is that he will bang his head as he sits up. He sits up without mishap and then bangs his head as he lies back down. The routine is most effective because the repetition works very well because it occurs so many times. This ensures that expectation is established in the minds of the viewers. Such a firmly established expectation then provides a bigger release laugh when it is disappointed and then fulfilled by variation.

For many of these films the plot is slender. In the short films of the Three Stooges the plots can be summed up in a few lines and the same is

true of *The Frozen Limits*. However, there are other, predominantly more recent, films in which the slapstick action and comic violence sit within a more complex narrative. This is true of the *Hangover* series of films. In the first of the series, *The Hangover*, it appears that the plot will be straightforward. Four men go to Las Vegas on a stag break and various mishaps befall them. However, this simple expectation is subverted by the complex nature of the mishaps which occur. The plot is also made more complex by being presented as something that the men cannot remember as a consequence of having been drugged. Three of them wake on the morning after the stag night to discover that they have lost the groom. The film then depicts their attempts to retrace their steps and find their friend. In this way many of the painful things which happen to them are integral to the plot in a way which is unusual in earlier slapstick films. In *The Hangover* violence becomes a representation of the challenges that must be surmounted for the quest to be successfully completed. The more random and, therefore, less predictable the challenge, the better. The audience's sense of anticipation is aroused by the seemingly incongruous nature of events. The first of the challenges, finding a tiger in the bathroom of their suite, only presents the threat of violence and pain at this early stage in the film, inevitably establishing a sense of anticipation in the audience but it does set the scene for the magnitude of the challenge that lies before them. The second challenge is finding a baby. The three men, Alan, Stu and Phil, have no more idea how the baby came to be there than they do about the tiger. The contrast between the tiger and its likely consequences and the baby and its likely consequences neatly symbolises the difficulties they face. Finding a hospital bracelet on Phil's arm, the trio decide to go to the hospital to see if they can gather any clues as to what occurred the night before. When the hotel valet brings their car it turns out not to be their car but a police car; the doctor at the hospital tells them Phil had high quantities of Rufilin (a date rape drug in his blood) and that when they arrived at the hospital they were talking about having come from Stu's wedding. The men head to the 'Best Little Chapel in the West' to find out more about the wedding. Now that all this complexity has been established violence and pain are introduced as a way of punctuating the action and of furthering the plot. Unlike the examples considered earlier in the chapter where the pain was incidental to the plot, in *Hangover* some of the pain and violence has to occur to reveal the next part of the quest or to allow the central trio to discover something that may help them find Doug. For example, outside the wedding chapel the police car is attacked by a group of thugs, setting up a mystery which

will be resolved later in the plot. Leaving the chapel and heading to see the woman Stu has married leads to them being arrested by the police for stealing the car. In order to be free to continue looking for Doug, they cut a deal with the police which involves each of them being tased in front of a room full of children to demonstrate the efficacy of the taser. Each of them suffers pain with Alan, the final one to be tased, experiencing the most pain. In this way the pain is integral to the narrative structure of the film. Without it the men cannot move on. Freed by the police, they go to reclaim their car. This sets up the opportunity for the next violent act. They hear knocking in the boot of the car and open it expecting to find Doug. Instead a small Chinese man, naked except for his socks leaps out and attacks each of them in turn with a crowbar before running off. Though the men do not realise it yet, this man, Mr Chow, is the reason their car was attacked at the wedding chapel. There is a distinction to be made between the pains that the trio experience because they believe it will lead them to Doug and those that they suffer as a result of the complexity of the plot and that will not be entirely explained to them or the audience until near the end of the film. However both kinds of pain – that which they take on knowingly (the tasing, and handling the tiger) and that which is inflicted on them by outside forces (the attack at the chapel, Mr Chow hitting them with the crowbar, their car being rammed by Mr Chow) keep the plot moving even when it is not clear to them that each event is leading them closer to Doug and moving the narrative closer to completion.

Not all the examples of slapstick pain in the film are integral to the plot in this way. After the beating by Mr Chow, Stu inadvertently smacks Alan's head with the car door. This makes no contribution to the plot and is a much more traditional use of slapstick to provoke laughter with no further purpose. The final example of pain in the film, Doug's extreme sunburn, does not contribute to the plot but occurs as a consequence of it. He has been left on the roof of the hotel and when they find him he launches himself at Phil to attack him. Doug crumples to the floor crying like a baby because of the intense pain in his skin. In this way *Hangover* incorporates incidental and narrative pain and violence in a way which is not seen in the earlier films.

One earlier film in which acts of comic violence are more closely connected with the narrative thrust is Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940) in which small acts of violence stand for much greater atrocities. This means that whilst the acts of violence performed may not be integral to the plot they have a symbolism which goes beyond the simple act. The example given earlier in this chapter of Hannah hitting another

character with a frying pan can be read both as a simple act of slapstick violence and as a symbolic act of resistance.

The dynamics of slapstick violence appear at first glance to be quite straightforward: one performer hits another performer and the audience laughs. However, the examples explored in this chapter demonstrate that the structure and performance of slapstick is much more complex. Its performance and reception is affected by the number of performers involved; by the performance, sound and filming techniques used to highlight the moments of violence and pain; by the use of repetition and inversion and by the creation of anticipation and fulfilment or inversion. In addition to the elements considered here, attention also needs to be paid, as the model in Chapter 3 suggests, to the nature of the pain involved, whether intentional, accidental or random.

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3

Comedy and Pain

The previous chapter explored the various ways in which pain and violence could be constructed within a performative frame. This chapter seeks to establish a theoretical framework by which we may understand and analyse how and why the depiction of others in pain can make us laugh. This chapter therefore will address the following questions: why does there appear to be a particular link between popular cultural forms and comic pain? How is it possible for the human mind to respond to pain in others with laughter? What kinds of laughter are provoked? What role does empathy or a lack of empathy play? What role does objectification play in this? Building on this knowledge base the chapter then offers a model by which pain in performance can be analysed. Drawing on a range of comic and non-comic examples it is possible to establish exactly which factors have to be in place to provoke laughter in response to pain.

Popular performance and comic pain

The history of comic pain is written largely in popular forms of performance. Popular art forms displaying a strong use of comic pain as a feature of their performance include *commedia dell'arte*, Punch and Judy shows, pantomime, circus, television comedy and film comedy, as has already been demonstrated. The focus of this book then is on the performance of comic pain in popular culture. There are examples, as Storey (2006) identifies, of works of art moving from high culture to low culture or vice versa. It is also true, particularly in performance, that the way that a text is performed and the locus of its performance can push the dramatic text in one direction or another. Consider, for example, the 2008 performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by

Footsbarn Theatre Company in a circus tent as part of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and the 2011 production of the same play, directed by Nancy Meckler at the RSC. The location of one performance in a circus tent by a company whose ethos is 'to make theatre that was accessible to all ages and classes' (Paddy Hayter, quoted in the *Sunday Times*) places it much more firmly in the realms of popular theatre whilst a production of the same play at the RSC is likely to be regarded as closer to high culture because of the reputation of the RSC as the home of Shakespeare. Shakespeare's plays are, of course, a prime example of the way that texts and performance can move between low and high culture through history. Originally written as pieces of popular theatre, shifts in language and in the way Shakespeare is perceived moved the plays into the realms of high culture where they (even the comedies) became worthy of academic consideration. Indeed Shakespeare (along with Molière) is one of the transmission points at which popular performance techniques make the move from low culture to high culture. Other examples would include Harrison Birtwistle's opera, *Punch and Judy*, and Stravinsky's ballet, *Pulcinella*. Despite these incursions into the territory of high culture, popular performance forms have not been as thoroughly explored as material relating to high culture.

Comedy, broadly speaking, falls into the territory of popular culture and, as such, comedy as a mode of performance tends to be regarded as less worthy of academic consideration and it is only with the recent emergence of comedy studies that modes of comic performance are being critically analysed. It is not surprising that the combination of comedy and pain has not been thoroughly scrutinised previously. Therefore, it is worth addressing the relationship between comic pain and popular theatre or 'low' culture forms of performance. Perhaps the relationship between low, popular or mass cultural forms and comic pain has flourished because the impulse to laugh at another's misfortune is a basic instinct. A high level of education is not needed to comprehend what is happening when one performer hits another with a piece of wood. Storey notes that high culture is often defined as that which is difficult: 'In other words, to be real culture, it has to be difficult' (2006, p. 5). Difficult culture is and was more open to being considered by academics because its difficulty needs explaining and exploring. On the surface the appeal of popular comedy forms seemed obvious and, therefore, did not need to be explored critically. They could be disregarded as accessible and ephemeral. However, many popular comedy forms have proved themselves to be remarkably long-lived. Some, like *commedia dell'arte*, now straddle the divide between high and low culture. *Commedia* may

have begun life as a popular cultural form and may still be considered and performed as such but its longevity and the complexity of its history have also ensured that it has received some academic consideration as a high cultural form. Let us return then to the notion that slapstick comedy appeals to a base instinct and can therefore be readily identified as a popular performance form.

The laughter that slapstick provokes may go some way to explaining its marginalisation in terms of academic consideration. Historically laughter was thought to be too dangerous to be indulged in by persons of intelligence, morality and class. The Greeks regarded laughter, and particularly excess laughter, as undesirable. In book 3 of *The Republic* Plato advises Greek citizens to avoid laughter: 'For a fit of laughter which has been indulged to excess almost always produces a violent reaction', suggesting that laughter is bad for us. He also suggests that when we laugh at others malice is usually involved and therefore laughter is not entirely good or noble. Epictetus' *Enchiridion* (135 ACE; available online) warned against laughter: 'Let not your laughter be loud, frequent, or abundant'. Halliwell identifies two kinds of laughter in Ancient Greek society. He describes these as playful laughter and consequential laughter. The former includes such elements as 'lightness of tone; autonomous enjoyment; psychological relaxation; and a shared acceptance of the self-sufficient presuppositions or conventions of such laughter by all who participate in it' (Halliwell, 1991, p. 283). On the other hand consequential laughter has a purpose beyond pure pleasure. It has some intention to inflect behaviour by causing shame or embarrassment. How these two kinds of laughter relate to Plato's attitudes is not immediately clear. Playful laughter could be indulged in to excess but would probably not involve malice. This is the kind of laughter which is commonly produced by slapstick performance. We laugh at the silliness of the victim but as the victim is fictional and the comedy is deliberately performed, the laughter has very little consequence. Consequential laughter may involve malice because part of the intention of consequential laughter is to correct improper behaviour by using laughter as a corrective. In this case laughter at least has a purpose beyond pleasure. Slapstick performance exists in what Turner in *From Ritual to Theatre* (1982) would define as a 'liminoid' space. The performance may carry a moral message or may act as a warning to those watching not to behave as stupidly as those performing but it remains resolutely false, located in a fictional world that has only limited bearing on the real world.

The introduction offered a brief overview of traditional theories of comedy but there are two key difficulties with applying these theories

directly to the performance of comic pain. Firstly, creators of slapstick performances court laughter. They construct their films, plays and performances in such a way as to provoke laughter from their audience. Indeed the performance would hardly be considered a success if the audience did not laugh. This draws into question elements of the earlier theories. Superiority theory, for example, claims that we laugh because we suddenly perceive ourselves as being superior to the person who has just tripped over or fallen off a ladder. Whilst this may be true in life, the situation is much less clear-cut in the realm of performance. We must deal with the dual nature of the performer who is both actual body and unreal character at once. We must also consider that, however well performed the fall or trip may be, we know that the trip is not real but performed. This raises an important question about what provokes our laughter. Are we laughing because we would laugh at such an event in real life? Perhaps there is another question to frame too. Are we laughing because we know very well that whilst such things might happen this particular event has been constructed solely with the intention of making us laugh? If the response to the second question is yes then a more complex response is under way than the earlier question suggests. If we laugh because we know an action is performed then we are responding primarily because we know the pain is not real. However, even as we laugh at the performance of pain we may be aware that such a performance carries the risk of inflicting real pain. As the fictional character performs the fictional trip the real body of the performer performs a facsimile of the trip. In performing this facsimile, they may feel actual pain. So, if earlier writers found it hard to pinpoint what happens when we laugh at real events I would suggest that we have a harder task ahead of us in order to establish just what enables us to laugh at performed pain. Too close to reality and we may struggle to laugh for fear that the pain is real. Eastman, writing in 1937, suggested that 'we come to the world endowed with an instinctive tendency to laugh and have this feeling in response to pains presented playfully' (1937, p. 45). Given the widespread occurrence of laughter through history and across continents we can, perhaps, accept at face value Eastman's assertion that we are born with a tendency to laugh. What is more interesting is the notion that such a feeling might occur in response to pain presented playfully. Here then is the suggestion that a playful frame needs to be established before we can laugh at pain. Laughter is, of course, highly subjective, highly personal and there will be individuals, at one end of the spectrum, who never find the performance of pain funny and those, at the other end of the spectrum who laugh even when they know the

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pain is real. When I discuss pain and laughter with my undergraduate students many say that when somebody falls they only laugh when they know the person is fine or if the person had been doing something which meant they were asking for trouble. So if somebody is swinging back on their chair, slips and bangs their head they may well be laughed at because they appear to deserve their punishment. On the other hand somebody innocently sitting on a chair which collapses may not be laughed at until we are sure they are not hurt. Still these examples drawn from everyday reality suggest that, broadly, we are unlikely to laugh at actual pain unless we feel it is in some way deserved. The relationship between morality and humour, in the context of the performance of pain will be explored in Chapters 6 and 7.

There is however, a significant difference between our response to real pain and our responses to performed pain which needs to be further explored. In *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humour*, Morreall suggests that there is a link between what he defines as disengagement and amusement. If we are too closely engaged with the victim then our high level of empathy is likely to make it harder for us to laugh at their suffering. This is, in part at least, because we find abrupt cognitive shifts disturbing. The solution for Morreall lies in taking a playful attitude to the problem. One way in which this can happen is if the problem is fictionalised. ...knowing those situations are not real, we can treat them playfully. Sympathy doesn't arise to block our enjoyment of the potentially disturbing scene. The more obviously fictional the character is, the easier the play mode is to achieve' (2009, p. 53). This relates to Bergson's much earlier contention that 'the comic demands something like a momentary anaesthesia of the heart' (2005, p. 3). If we are too emotionally involved our laughter response is limited or even prevented. So we can see, therefore, that a play frame or comic frame which signals to us that we do not need to respond with empathy is key in freeing us to laugh at the performance of pain.

There are other difficulties with earlier theories in relation to slapstick performance. Those theorists who assert that laughter comes as a response to something incongruous happening were clearly not thinking of comic films and plays in which the occurrence of comic pain is either signalled clearly before it occurs so that the watchers have the pleasure of anticipation or where the comic pain is repeated and escalated in such a way that little can be left in the way of incongruity. Whilst ideas surrounding the relationship between humour and incongruity have been considered by such thinkers as Beattie, Kant, Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer none of them consider humour in relation to

performance as their focus was on a philosophical understanding of humour. Incongruity works very differently when it is functioning as part of a playful or performative mode. There are times when laughter is provoked by the shock occurrence of violence or pain. When this kind of pain occurs we may laugh because we are shocked, partly by the action and partly by its incongruity. There are however many more examples of comic pain where the exposure of the audience to pain occurs gradually and incrementally. In this way the pain and violence is unlikely to shock us, indeed, on the contrary an expectation is established. So whilst the play frame is one important consideration in exploring how we respond to the performance of comic pain, it is also necessary to examine the ways in which the opposing concepts of incongruous shock and anticipation contribute to creating an environment in which laughter feels like an appropriate response.

Thus far the roles of empathy versus disengagement and of incongruity versus anticipation have been considered. What is also clear is the importance of the establishment of a play or comic frame that is recognised clearly enough to support the notion of disengagement. One of the ways in which a play frame is suggested in everyday life is via laughter. In the world of performance the establishment of the play frame may occur through the combination of a much wider range of strategies and techniques. On television, laughter (in the form of the laughter track) may still be used to cue the audience to the fact that laughter is an appropriate response but many other elements also come into play including the publicity surrounding the film or performance; the reputation of the performers, writers and director; sound track and sound effects. For this exploration, therefore, laughter is less important as an establishing feature of the play frame and is more important as a signifier of the success of the performance. Different elements of the performance of comic pain provoke different kinds of laughter.

Kinds of laughter

We can laugh in a range of ways and the kind of laugh provoked is a clear indicator of the nature of our response to the source of humour. We can laugh *at* somebody or something. This occurs where we feel in some way distanced from the object of our laughter. We can laugh *with* somebody. In this instance we feel part of the joking experience and we are sharing closely in the laughter. Sometimes laughter functions as *release* when we are shocked or challenged by the humorous event. It is possible, of course, to give a full and open laugh indicating that the

laughter response is whole-hearted and unchecked by any moral or emotional complications, whether we are laughing at or with somebody. On those occasions where we are moved to laughter but feel that we should perhaps not be laughing, for example at an example of comic pain which appears too painful or at a racist or sexist joke, then the laughter may be more guarded. We may also laugh as part of an *exchange* because we recognise that laughter is demanded. In this situation we may give what is best defined as a groan laugh. We recognise that something that was intended as humorous has occurred. We understand that laughter is the desired response but the response is reluctant. This kind of laughter may be provoked by a joke that has been told too many times or where the pay off to a new joke is too predictable. In giving a groan laugh we fulfil our part of the humour/laughter exchange, signalling at the same time that the laughter is reluctant or that we feel that the joker barely deserves it. Sometimes laughter is a *shocked* response. We laugh because we have been startled and there has been little or no time to process a more cognitive response. This shocked response is often given in response to the home videos so beloved of programmes like *You've Been Framed!* or *America's Worst Home Videos*. We see the person jumping on the diving board. We watch them slip and hit themselves in some painful way. We know we should not laugh at another's pain but still we give a shocked *ouch* laugh. Perhaps this *ouch* laugh helps to ease our own discomfort as we witness another's pain. This kind of laughter is particularly pertinent to the focus of this book and often occurs when the play or comic frame is not clearly enough established.

Wright identifies four kinds of laughter in *Why is that so Funny?* These are the recognised laugh, the visceral laugh, the bizarre laugh and the surprise laugh. According to Wright the recognised laugh occurs when we laugh at normality or at typicality. This kind of laughter is not relevant to a consideration of how and why we laugh at comic pain because such comedy lies beyond the everyday. On the other hand, 'The visceral laugh comes from extremis' (2006, p. 16). This kind of laughter relates to the shocked and ouch laughs detailed above. We give a visceral laugh when something violent or disturbing has occurred but 'our ability to laugh depends entirely on whether we believe the "ok signal" or not' (p. 12). This kind of laughter is central to the way in which we respond to comic pain. It seems entirely reasonable that our response to the inflicting of pain should be sited in bodily feelings rather in the intellect. This notion of the bodily response to comic pain and comic violence will be returned to later in this chapter when we consider the role that empathy plays in governing our response to slapstick performance.

Wright's third kind of laughter, the bizarre laugh is relevant to the present study because it is the laugh that we give when something cannot get any worse and the only place left to go is to the bizarre. This can be the case in scenes where the violence or pain escalates to a level of intensity that cannot be sustained for very long. The example that Wright cites is of John Cleese as Basil Fawlty beating his car with a branch. Jim Carrey beating himself up as Fletcher Reede in *Liar Liar* is another example. The surprise laugh, Wright's final definition, comes as a response to 'the little trick that catches us unaware' (p. 22) and as such may also have a place in our response to comic pain and comic violence.

The kind of laughter that we give is closely connected to our reason for laughing. The purest laughter is an instinctive response to a situation that provokes pleasure and enjoyment. Sometimes we laugh to define ourselves in relation to those around us, either to claim our place in the community of which we are part or to define ourselves as separate. Sometimes we laugh to dispel unease. In considering why we laugh in relation to comic pain we must explore the role played by empathy in governing our responses.

What role does empathy play?

The model for analysing our responses to comic pain set out later in this chapter will explain the various ways in which empathy can affect our response to comic pain but first it is necessary to consider what other theorists have already had to say about the role of empathy in laughter and in responding to performance. Bergson suggests that that we can only laugh when we respond with the intellect rather than emotion. It is true that if we empathise too closely with the victim of comic violence we are unlikely to laugh because we will be too busy expending sympathy. It is hard to laugh and sympathise at the same time. However, Bergson's suggestion that we respond with the intellect runs counter to Wright's definition of the visceral laugh where the intellect is excluded. In the context of the performance of physical pain we are much more likely to respond with our bodies than our minds. If we stepped back and considered, in a rational and logical manner, what we are watching in the sequence of *Liar Liar* where Carrey beats himself up then we would be unlikely to laugh. As the sequence opens Carrey hits himself three times under the chin and then rubs soap into his eyes. If we stopped to consider what this might actually feel like then we would be unlikely to laugh. In fact our laughter is governed by a complex combination of what both Bergson and Wright suggest.

Bergson says we need a 'momentary anaesthesia of the heart': Wright's use of the word visceral suggests the response is rooted in the body not the mind. What exactly is going on then when we laugh at Carrey beating himself up? The character is not likeable, so the audience may well not feel emotionally sympathetic towards him; perhaps in that sense the heart is anaesthetised. However, as Nevitt observes 'we understand physical contact partly because we have experienced it in our own bodies' (2013, p. 15). As the model below suggests it is very difficult to short-circuit the instinctive matching of our body to the performer's that goes on as we watch Carrey's performance. We know soap in the eyes hurts. In fact we are combining all these elements within the safety of the firmly established play frame. If we don't like the character we are more likely to laugh at his pain, and the performative nature of the pain (the sequence opens with the cartoonish expression 'owee', he hits himself three times, the action is supported by music) frees us further to laugh. We return therefore to the idea that there must be a sufficient lack of reality. The play frame or what Wright calls the 'ok signal' must be strong enough to offset the violence and pain we see. Another way in which empathy can be suppressed is by the use of objectification in the presentation of the performer.

All the forms of performance identified earlier in this chapter and in the previous one employ a range of techniques which encourage the viewer to objectify the performer or to be in some way convinced that the pain the performer appears to feel is not real. In *commedia dell'arte* the use of half masks diminishes the human connection between performer and audience and increases the level of stylisation in performance which in turn reduces the naturalism. The dominance of broadly stereotyped characters aids ready identification in an open-air performance but also encourages the audience to view the characters as types rather than individuals. The degree of otherness established for the performer is, therefore, likely to diminish empathy to the point where laughter will flow more readily in response to performed pain because the performed nature of the pain is highlighted. To a great extent many of these comments can also be applied to pantomime. Whilst performers may not be physically masked, heavy make-up is common, as is cross-dressing. Both the make-up and the use of the pantomime dame and the female actor for the 'Prince Charming' role encourage the audience to view the characters as being removed from reality. Once again this is likely to reduce the viewer's belief in the reality of the pain, thus releasing laughter. Similarly circus clowns with their garish face make-up, red noses and outlandish costumes stand

outside of everyday reality and when we watch pain inflicted upon them we do so without regarding them as really feeling pain. Also the formulaic nature of clown entrées (often repeated from circus to circus) reinforces the performative nature of the pain. In Punch and Judy the objectification is obviously taken one step further because the performer is a puppet. Mr Punch, a descendant of *commedia*'s Pulcinella, regularly beats his wife and drops his baby. Even the routine of dropping the baby will provoke laughter in an audience because they know that pain is only being demonstrated and there is no risk that any pain is actually being felt.

How empathy contributes to our understanding of and response to performance has been the focus of a range of interdisciplinary research. Whilst understanding the role that empathy plays in how we understand and respond to the bodies of others is of great interest to the creative arts including dance, theatre and film, it is also the focus of research in the disciplines of psychology and neuroscience. It is worth exploring some of this research here because it has a direct bearing on both the second and third stages ('embodied understanding' and 'empathic pain response') of the model proposed below. At the heart of this research lies the concept of mirror neurons. Dinstein (2008) defines and reflects on mirror neurons suggesting that 'we covertly and unconsciously simulate ourselves performing the movement, access our own associated intentions and goals for that particular movement, and assign them to the person we are observing'. Dinstein goes on to suggest that 'taken a step further, mirror neurons can be thought of as a sensory-motor gateway for forming an internal representation of the observed person's state' (2008, p. R957). This scientific research identifies some of the neural activity that occurs when we observe others, either in real life or in performance. As we see them carry out an action we internally match their movement to our own and thereby can make assumptions about the other person's feelings and intentions. Research such as this has been taken up by writers interested in the concept of what is defined as kinaesthetic empathy by some and as proprioception by others. These concepts are helpful in analysing audience responses in relation to film, theatre, dance and, I would argue, physical comedy. Philosophers Theodor Lipps and Elaine Stein and psychologist Albert Michotte considered empathy and how it connects performer and viewer. A helpful summary and application of their thinking can be found in D'Aloia's 'Cinematic Empathy: Spectator Involvement in the Film Experience' in Reynolds and Reason's *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices*. Focusing on an example drawn from Reed's film *The Acrobat*

and following Stein in particular D'Aloia suggests that 'the activation of the acrobat's lived body entails a corresponding activation of the kinaesthetic sensations of the spectator's lived body' (2012, p. 94). It is just such an activation that I suggest takes place in the second and third stages of my model for the consideration of performed pain. In order to understand and respond to the performer's actions and reactions the viewers have to be able to mirror those actions and reactions in their own minds, allowing them to understand how their own bodies might respond in a similar situation. Guillemette Bolens, writing in the same volume asserts that 'in an act of kinaesthetic empathy, I may then internally simulate what these sensations may possibly feel like, via my own kinaesthetic memory' (2012, p. 145). If our own experiences fall short of the performance we are witnessing then we can harness the power of imagination to fill in those gaps which are not filled by memory. If we witness a performer being hit around the head by a plank and falling to the floor, but we have never had such an experience, then we will instinctively draw on our closest experience, probably involving a blow to the head. In relation to comedy another use of the imagination is to supply a situation that is suggested but not performed. If a performer teeters on the edge of a high building but is then pulled back out of harm's way, in the moments that we watched them sway precariously we also imagined what such a fall would be like. In this way we are able to respond with kinaesthetic energy to what is absent but suggested, as well as to what is present and demonstrated. When we watch a performance, whether it is live or filmed, we must engage with the performer, and in physical comedy the primary communicator used by the performer is their body. So, 'to engage with them is to engage with their body, to interpret and evaluate it through an embodied and empathetic response' (Bolens, 2012, p. 159).

A model for analysing pain in performance

In the light of the above, I therefore suggest the following model:

1. Recognition
2. Embodied understanding
3. Empathic pain response
4. Appreciation

I would argue that there is an entailment relationship between the four elements in this model. By this I mean that each step is dependent on

the completion of the step that precedes it. Therefore, recognition must occur first (usually through the establishment of a clear comic frame); once this has been established the viewer will go on to make decisions in relation to embodied understanding which will also involve an assessment of the level of performance skill. Following that the viewer will go on to form an opinion about the nature of the pain involved. When we watch a comic performance these judgements occur swiftly, instinctively and without, for the most part, any awareness of the steps being taken. It remains the case however that these instinctive decisions will be made and the nature of the decisions will determine whether or not we appreciate the physical humour and to what extent we demonstrate our appreciation of that humour through laughter. My own model is an extension of a model suggested by Jennifer Hay in 2008. Emanating from the discipline of psychology, Hay offers a sensible model for analysing joke and humour competencies. Her three-stage model,

1. Recognition
2. Understanding
3. Appreciation

is offered in 'The Pragmatics of Humor Support' and provides a useful basis for the creation of an expanded model which addresses the competencies required for getting a physical rather than linguistic joke.

There is obviously some overlap between the reception of linguistic and physical jokes. The first step in recognising that what is being seen or heard is intended to provoke laughter is common to both. In each case the audience interprets certain signals that cue what follows as humorous. A joke teller can signal the joke verbally (for example, 'I know this really good joke'), by laughter or by employing a tone of voice that clearly conveys that they are joking. Similarly a comic performer uses a variety of techniques to establish a comic frame. For example there is something intrinsically comical in the way both Wisdom as Pitkin and Crawford as Spencer move. Seeing them walk is enough to signal to the audience that what follows cannot be taken seriously. Other elements might include relying on the audience's foreknowledge of the performer or director's reputation to give an indication of genre before the performance begins. In this way recognition can be established for both linguistic and physical jokes. However, moving beyond the question of recognition, Hay's model is too limited to be applied usefully to slapstick performance involving pain. Hence my refinement of understanding into embodied understanding and the

addition of the step that focuses on the evaluation of the nature of the pain involved in the physical comedy.

Step 1: recognition

In terms of comic performance, recognition relies on the firm establishment of a comic frame. If we witness someone falling over we may or may not find it funny. If we witness a known comic performer falling over in a film that has been advertised as a comedy, there is a much greater chance that we will laugh because clear signals have been given indicating that laughter is the desired response. A key element in the recognition of a comic performance frame occurs in the identification of both genre and performer. All of this requires a certain amount of cultural knowledge in providing a context in so far as the viewer's response to the material will be affected by how much knowledge they have of the director, writer and performers. More specific context and further clues to the recognition of the comic frame can be provided by the employment of performance and filming techniques that are strongly associated with comedy. These clues include techniques such as close-ups on facial grimaces, the inclusion of sound effects to reinforce moments of physical impact and the use of commentary and music. For example, in *Jackass* the performers sometimes offer a commentary on what is happening. The use of music to emphasise comedy has its roots in silent film comedy but is used very effectively in *Liar Liar*. As the sequence begins with Reede trying to see a solution to his problems the music being played is gentle and sombre in tone. As he bangs his head against the wall it increases in pace. The moment at which he has the idea of beating himself up is emphasised by a glissando and the violence which follows is supported by a pastiche of the kind of music often found in action films. In this way the comic content is supported by non-diegetic sound. Another significant element of the way in which we respond to comic violence is the presence of an onscreen audience whose responses manipulate our reception. The onscreen witness models a reaction and reinforces the performative nature of what we are seeing. An important element of the exchange of pain (or perceived pain) for laughter is the manner in which we are given 'permission' to complete our part of the exchange.

The physical realisation of comic characters also helps to establish the comic frame. The quality of 'otherness' in this context means not only a seeming difference in physical ability but an otherness that sets the performed character apart from the average person. This may be indicated through costume that marks the character out as different, perhaps by

not matching societal norms or by being either too big or too small. Another indication may involve the stance and movement patterns of the character. These may differ from commonly accepted behaviour in a number of ways including speed of movement, rhythm of movement and exaggeration of facial expressions. Vocally, a character may be presented as markedly comic, often with a repeated catchphrase which enhances character recognition. For example in *Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em* Crawford employs a high-pitched, hesitant voice for Frank Spencer and there is the repeated 'oooo Betty!' every time he is shocked by something.

Step 2: embodied understanding

In terms of the suggested model, once the comic modality has been recognised and the level of skill has been assessed, the next step is understanding. In Hay's original model understanding is a single element. The audience either *gets* the joke or it does not (though she does also suggest that it may get the joke but withhold appreciation, particularly in a social context, for example in a home setting a teenager may 'get' a joke with sexual content but may choose not to reveal this through laughter). Responses to physical and visual comedy are more complex, involving what I have termed *embodied understanding*. When audience members view a physical joke, I would suggest that it is likely that they go through an instinctive process of matching their body to the performer's body. In the previous section I identified research which has been carried out in the area of kinaesthetic empathy and which has a direct bearing on this stage of the model. Instinctively the first stage of this step is for the viewer to match the physical actions of the performer 'forming an internal representation of the observed person's state' (Dinstein, 2008, p. R957). Secondly, and swiftly, a judgement is made as to whether their body *could* do what is being performed and, following on from that, a judgement is made as to whether they *would* do what is being done. What occurs then is an instinctive attempt (which will be more or less successful from person to person) at physical empathy. Depending on the level of physical empathy achieved, the audience reaches a state of either *identified* embodied understanding or *unidentified* embodied understanding. In the first, the viewers recognise the actions and believe that their own bodies could match them. In the second the viewers recognise the actions as possible for some but believe that their own bodies could not match them. For Clayton, the question is 'How do I know the pain of another is genuine or that it is anything like the way in which I experience pain?' (2007, p. 173). The first part

of this question – the issue of the reality or otherwise of the pain will be dealt with in the next step of my model. It is the second half of the quotation which is of interest here, raising as it does the notion of matching the experience of another to our own in the moment of viewing. As mentioned earlier, Clayton goes on to suggest the idea that the performer's body may be in some way 'other' than our own. In the suggested model, the viewers' ability to experience embodied understanding is key to influencing the nature of their response to the humour. Over-identification, as might occur if the viewer watching a performer fall off a chair and bang their head had recently had a similar experience, would be likely to reduce the level of laughter in response to the pain. Similarly, under-identification, where the viewer rejects the action as physically impossible or extremely unlikely, is also likely to reduce the laughter response. Between the two lies the optimum level of embodied understanding. Within the recognised comic frame, the viewer is able to understand how a human body could carry out the action being performed and can even see how he or she too might perform all or part of such action. Whether or not the actions suit the situation is a further variable, and the degree of incongruity that is likely to be acceptable will be affected by the nature of the comic frame already established.

In assessing the extent to which our own bodies are capable of doing what the performer is doing we are simultaneously assessing the performer's skills. If the viewers are skilled physical performers they are likely to set the bar much higher before being impressed by the performer. If they have reached a position of identified embodied understanding (both recognising and owning the actions), they are less likely to have the joyous surprise response of less skilled viewers. In assessing skill the viewers will take into account elements such as physical strength, physical flexibility, ability to control facial expression and specialised skills. The most obvious example of specialist skill in the sequences of slapstick considered later is Michael Crawford's roller-skating ability, as he careers over bridges and along roads. He has enough skill to make Frank Spencer appear completely incompetent while remaining in control when carrying out all his own stunts. In such cases admiration and an element of relieved joy contribute to our desire to laugh.

Step 3: evaluation of pain

What then becomes important in the third stage of the model is the extent to which the viewer assesses the level of pain involved for the performer. Of particular importance at this stage of the model is the

viewer's awareness of the duality of performance. As we watch, we are aware that the action is simultaneously real and not real. We see both the performer's body and the character's body and the latter may appear to experience pain without that pain necessarily being felt by the performer. So, just as we make empathic judgements about what the body is doing in step 2 of the model, so in step 3 we make judgements about the nature of pain depicted in the slapstick sequence. As we watch a slapstick sequence we can simultaneously enjoy the physical outcome while assessing the rehearsal necessary and the precautions that are likely to be in place. We look, for example, for the wires supporting the performer or judge where the crash mats must be just out of frame as the performer makes a spectacular fall. As a result of this process we are able to come to one of three decisions: that real pain must be involved; that there is rehearsed or performed pain involved; or that there is no pain involved (this can also appear as what might be defined as 'near-miss pain' or 'threat of pain' where the anticipation of pain is built up but where it is avoided at the last moment).

Step 4: appreciation

The most obvious way of showing appreciation for any kind of joke, linguistic or physical, is to laugh. Ideally such laughter is a spontaneous reaction; the viewer cannot help but laugh at the antics of the performer. In watching comedy a range of laughs is possible. However, rather than indulging in a semantic consideration of the various words by which laughter can be designated – such as giggle, laugh, belly laugh, guffaw – I intend to make use of the definitions suggested by Wright and outlined earlier. His recognised laugh, visceral laugh, bizarre laugh and surprise laugh are particularly useful because in defining them Wright pays attention not to the tonal quality of the laugh but to the nature of the event that has provoked the laughter. Thus the term recognised laugh is used to describe laughter provoked by typicality, by situations that we recognise. 'We laugh because we understand and because we can share that understanding' (2006, p. 9). The opposite of the recognised laugh is, according to Wright, the bizarre laugh because it 'comes out of nowhere. It defies conventional logic' (2006, p. 18). Both of these can be readily applied to slapstick humour but the visceral laugh has a particularly close connection to slapstick because it is provoked by 'An accident, like a trip, or a near miss ... Hits, acts of aggression or violence' (2006, p. 13). Finally the surprise laugh, as described by Wright can be found more readily in the theatre than in mediated performance, relying as it does on catching the audience out, often with a scenic device.

However it can also be present in combination with the other forms of laughter. Indeed 'sometimes we laugh at all four elements at the same time, sometimes individually and sometimes in sequence' (2006, p. 23).

A final element of my approach is to offer a taxonomy of performed pain. This will establish a vocabulary that will facilitate the easy recognition and discussion of different kinds of performed pain. For example, central to the work in hand are a variety of terms: accidental self-inflicted pain; accidental pain inflicted by or on others; pain inflicted by 'malevolent' objects or animals; intentional self-inflicted pain; and intentional pain inflicted by others. For the most part they are self-explanatory but perhaps a precise explanation of how they will be used here would be helpful.

Accidental self-inflicted pain is very common in slapstick comedy and usually occurs because of the incompetence of the protagonist. For example in *Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em*, the character, Frank Spencer, crashes into a shop at the end of his wild roller-skate ride because he is unable to control the skates efficiently. The accidental nature of the pain allows the audience to feel sympathy for the protagonist whilst allowing a synchronous sensation of superiority as the viewer believes that he or she would never be so incompetent. There is rarely any moral context for this category of pain, at least partly because the issue of victimisation does not arise.

Accidental pain inflicted by or on others can refer either to pain inflicted on the protagonist by others but without any intentionality involved or to pain accidentally inflicted by the protagonist on other characters. Morality is unlikely to play a part in the viewer's response to this but the notion of escalation may affect the laughter response. If the pain is repeated it may become funnier to the viewer because the notions of expectation and fulfilment are clearly in operation. Alternatively, if the same innocent victim is repeatedly hurt the viewer may feel less inclined to laugh.

The category *pain inflicted by 'malevolent' objects or animals* refers to the comedy moments where characters are in some way hurt or harmed by an object which is either out of control or appears to have some kind of animate control over the pain it is inflicting. One example of this occurs in *Modern Times* in the sequence where Chaplin's character is chosen to be the guinea pig for an automatic feeding machine. As the action in the scene escalates the operators lose control of the machine which then tips soup over Chaplin and whizzes corn on the cob round and round against his mouth before repeatedly hitting him in the face with the mouth wiper. In this case the viewer does not attribute any

malevolence to the machine. It is simply malfunctioning. When we consider the house in *The Money Pit*, the sheer accretion of incidents begins to suggest some evil intent on the part of the house. Pain inflicted by animals is also considered in this category because it is rare for animals to cause pain as a result of planned action. Usually animals cause pain either accidentally (a dog trips somebody up) or by behaving in the way their species is expected to behave (a bird pecks somebody). This lack of intent renders the animals similar to objects that are out of control in that there is a lack of agency or intention in the infliction of pain. There are, however, a small number of significant exceptions which will be considered in more detail in Chapter 5.

Intentional self-inflicted pain is relatively rare but one clear example is that described above from *Liar Liar* when Carrey's character beats himself up in the washroom in order to try to stop himself from telling the truth in a situation where he would rather lie. The viewer may be prompted to consider the morality of the protagonist's actions. Can his or her motivation be understood?

Intentional pain inflicted by others covers those incidents either where the protagonist is deliberately hurt by somebody else or where the protagonist deliberately hurts somebody else. This is perhaps the most complex example of comedy pain because a number of considerations come into play in terms of governing the laughter response. Thus notions of morality – in particular the idea of whether or not the victim deserves to be hurt – will influence the laughter response. In *Home Alone*, when eight-year-old Kevin McAllister defends his home against burglars and seriously injures them in the process, the viewer is likely to laugh despite (or even because of) the violence that provokes the pain. The laughter response is likely to be relatively free because Kevin's actions can be justified on two counts. Firstly he is a child defending himself and his home against two adults, so there is an element of overturning the expected status relationship. Secondly the adults have been depicted as villains so the battle is between good and evil and Kevin is clearly on the side of good. When we consider intentionally inflicted pain, therefore, concepts such as the relative status and age of the victim and perpetrator are important, as are notions of right and wrong. We would be unlikely to be amused if the two thieves hurt Kevin, because for two adults to harm a child is wrong in terms of status interaction (we laugh when lower status attacks higher, not vice versa) and the villainy of the thieves would be doubled if they were committing (or attempting to commit) not only burglary but bodily harm too. It has to be acknowledged that they attempt to hurt Kevin but the fact

that he is always at least one step ahead of them adds to our enjoyment. The interactions between Kevin and the would-be thieves will be considered in more detail in Chapter 6. Potentially, intentionally inflicted pain offers the greatest opportunity for provoking laughter.

Shame and humiliation

A further element that needs to be considered is the extent to which shame or humiliation should be considered as pain when it occurs in a comic setting. The examples previously considered are all concerned with the inflicting of physical pain which may result in cuts, bruises, burns and broken limbs. Some comedy performances make use of shame and humiliation as a form of abuse and it is clear, in these situations, that the psychological damage inflicted can be seen as (and is probably experienced as) pain. In Joe Orton's *What the Butler Saw* Geraldine Barclay is humiliated by both Prentice and Rance though neither hurt her physically. The humiliation is deliberately inflicted (in the same way that punching somebody deliberately inflicts physical pain) and she is clearly victimised by the two men. Similarly in *Furry Vengeance* Dan Sanders is repeatedly humiliated by the acts of the animals. In this instance the protagonist and the audience believe the humiliation (and related physical discomfort) to be caused by the animals whilst the other characters believe that Sanders is suffering some kind of breakdown which, in itself, constitutes a further humiliation. Humiliation as psychological pain is a complex area for consideration, so for this study, humiliation will be considered only where it occurs within a broader framework of physical pain.

Part II

Types of Pain Analysed

DEMO

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DEMO

4

Accidental Pain

Within a performative context accidental pain often occurs as a result of incompetence. This incompetence leads to the infliction of pain on either the performer's own body or on the body of another performer. There are also occasions when the same accident causes pain to both the protagonist and another in the same moment. Therefore, this chapter will deal with two kinds of accidental pain: that which is self-inflicted and that which is inflicted on others. In each of these it must be clear to the audience that no malice or harm was intended by the perpetrator. Pain that is delivered with intention will be dealt with in Chapters 6 and 7. Intentionality or lack of it is a key influence in how we respond to the depiction of pain and how we judge those who are suffering and those who have inflicted the pain. Whilst accidental pain is usually the result of incompetence and leads to the protagonist tripping or falling or bumping into things, there are occasions where the accident is caused by a misbehaving prop or object. Examples such as these will not be dealt with here but will be considered in Chapter 5.

The performance frame

Audience responses to performed accidental pain are likely to be quite straightforward in that no moral judgement is required. The pain is accidentally caused and, therefore, does not raise questions of deservedness or justice as the inflictor did not intend to inflict the pain. Rather than being concerned with morality the audience is likely to enjoy a comfortable sense of superiority, believing that they would have enough wit to avoid inflicting pain on themselves. However, sympathy may well come into play in governing the audience response because it is likely that anybody watching performed pain has accidentally hurt themselves or

somebody else at some point in their experience. This ability to connect lived experience with the performance of pain has the potential to limit the laughter response. If the audience members are occupied with remembering how much it hurt when they hit their own head, they are less likely to laugh when the protagonist has a similar experience. This highlights the importance of establishing the comic frame strongly. As has been demonstrated earlier this can be done in a number of ways. If the performer is well known for comic performance then the audience expectation of comedy is likely to be high; equally the performance, film or television show may have been advertised as being a comedy. These are elements which can affect audience expectation prior to the beginning of the performance. During the action a ridiculous plot line, absurdity and caricatured performances may contribute to strengthening the audience's understanding of the piece as comic.

Using the model of response to comic pain put forward in Chapter 3, this chapter will analyse a number of examples of accidental pain drawn from theatre, film and television. From theatre I will explore *commedia dell'arte lazzi*, a number of circus clown entrées, Arthur Wing Pinero's 1885 farce, *The Magistrate*, and Dario Fo's *Trumpets and Raspberries*. Together these provide an interesting range of examples of the ways in which accidental pain can be deployed in a live performance environment. In relation to film, examples will be drawn from *The Early Bird* (1965) and *Man of the Moment* (1955) starring Norman Wisdom, *The Plank* (1967) starring Eric Sykes and from *There's Something about Mary* (1998), starring Ben Stiller and Cameron Diaz. The earlier three films provide a multitude of examples of accidental pain, either self-inflicted or inflicted on others. The latter provides a sequence that highlights the responses to and consequences of self-inflicted accidental pain. Televisual examples will be drawn from the classic television series *Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em*.

Non-individuation in live performance

The physical performance style of *commedia dell'arte* and the range of characters present in a typical *commedia* troupe provide an environment rich in opportunity for the performance of both comic pain and comic violence. The narratives of the scenarios commonly use deliberate violence and the causing of pain as a plot device (whether to further or to interrupt the plot) and these cases will be considered in Chapter 6 when we examine intentionally inflicted pain. Of more relevance to the present consideration of accidental pain are the *lazzi*.

In his key text, *Lazzi* (1983), Mel Gordon identifies 12 types of *lazzi*. The most important here is the category entitled 'comic violence/sadistic behaviour' though examples involving accidental pain can also be found in the categories 'acrobatic and mimic *lazzi*' and 'stage properties as *lazzi*'. Gordon provides a brief outline of each *lazzi* but, as they were a primarily performance rather than a scripted form, the outlines give only the merest indication of what actions might have been included when the *lazzi* were performed. This is one of the difficulties inherent in considering examples of accidental pain in non-scripted forms of performances. Even in scripted forms of performance sections of stage business might be left to the inspiration of the performers, so in attempting to track down the examples of accidental pain in *commedia* it is necessary to be alert to every clue. According to Gordon 'the themes of subconscious, and presumably unintentional, retribution and retaliation run through much of the minor *Commedia* action' (1983, p. 14). This subconscious desire for revenge upon his master may be in operation in the '*Lazzo* of the Knock' (p. 15) in which Pedrolino, as he wakes from sleep, bumps his head into his master, Cassandro. He then crushes Cassandro's bunioned toes with his 'enormous shoes'. It is easy for the audience to identify with this semi-conscious activity. If they should pause to judge whether Pedrolino should be doing what he does, his actions can be excused either by his sleepiness or by his lower status in relation to his master. The audience have an embodied understanding of the experience of both the aggressor and the victim and neither performer is likely to do anything of which the audience would think themselves physically incapable. This is also true of the '*Lazzo* of the Innocent By-Stander' (p. 15) in which Arlecchino and Pedrolino are intent on fighting but the Capitano who seeks to separate them receives most of the blows. This example is interesting because Pedrolino and Arlecchino do intend to cause pain but not to the person who suffers it. Within the context of original *commedia* performance the Capitano was a generally unsympathetic character so a contemporary audience would probably have enjoyed the spectacle of him being beaten and their enjoyment could have been enhanced by his pained reactions. The performance frame is important in that the stylised movement of the *commedia* performers together with their face masks encouraged the audience to respond to them as objects or as broad types rather than as individuals. The further a performer is away from being an individuated character, the easier it is for us to laugh at their pain.

This lack of individuation is central to an example of accidental pain which occurs in Fo's *Trumpets and Raspberries*. In act 2, scene 1 Rosa

is in conversation with a character whom she believes to be Antonio although the audience is aware that she is dealing alternately with Antonio and the character known as the Double (who looks identical to Antonio). She, therefore, tries to make a single line of sense out of two quite different sets of conversation, presenting us with an example of Bergson's interference of reciprocal series. The Double needs to be fed through a tube, using a mincer, because he is still not fully recovered from his operation. He asks Rosa to tie him down in order to feed him and tells her 'you must be strong, you must be strong at any cost' (act 2, scene 1). Given the context of crossing conversation between him and Antonio this sets up a sense of anticipation in the minds of the audience which is partially fulfilled when Rosa insists on strapping Antonio to a chair. Believing she is feeding the individual who has told her not to stop at any cost she force feeds Antonio, accidentally causing him pain. His response is to call out 'no, you are torturing me! Help...help!' (act 2, scene 1). In some ways this is a complex example because Rosa understands that she is inflicting some pain, but believes it to be both necessary and beneficial. However, the pain that she is inflicting on Antonio is not necessary, and the audience are aware of the dual characters and can understand the precise nature of the pain being inflicted. It is also clear from the paraphernalia being used to feed Antonio that this is an example of performed pain, aided by props, in which the performer does not suffer at all. The audience can therefore laugh freely because they can recognise both the performed nature of the pain and the farcical frame of the performance.

As was the case with *commedia*, the narrative structures of farce lend themselves most readily to examples of intentionally inflicted pain but there are a number of examples which operate in a similar way to the *lazzi* action discussed earlier. The characters of farces tend to be broad stereotypes 'who are only partially engaging' (Bermel, 1982, p. 22). That the engagement is only partial ensures for the audience an easier route to laughter derived either from the characters' pain or the absurdity of the situations in which they find themselves. It is also the case that often the pain, or the characters' reaction to pain, is heard but not seen. In *The Magistrate* one clear example of characters feeling pain is the moment when Cis and Poskett fall from the first floor to the street below. The audience have seen Cis and Poskett rush to the balcony; it has already been made clear that the balcony is weak and as they fall the action is suggested via sound effects. It is easier for the audience to laugh at this fall because they do not see it happen, neither do they see the consequences until much later in the play. The audience also

realises that the performers have not fallen anywhere at all. The pain here is suggested rather than witnessed. Later in the play more comedy is extracted from this fall when Poskett explains *'Putting his hand to his side as if severely bruised. Oh! Cis was all right, because I fell underneath; I felt it was my duty to do so'* (Pinero, 1885, act 3). In action this would have been extremely difficult to achieve but because Poskett is describing action which has not been witnessed he can present it in a way that the audience will find absurd. This creates a second laugh from the earlier off-stage action. This suggestion is likely to work against any sense of embodied empathy the audience may feel as a result of linking the fall in the play to falls they have experienced. When it occurs off-stage they may empathise, encouraged by the sound effects but when Poskett describes an impossible feat as having occurred as part of the fall then the absurdity of the situation blocks any possible empathy.

On stage, within the narrative structure of farce, opportunities for accidental pain are few and far between. In part this is because whilst the farce plot is absurd and ridiculous, the characters must behave as if events in their world are absolutely serious. As a result the consequences of pain would have to be shown to be serious and such an attitude would make it harder for an audience to laugh at the accidental pain. Too much sympathy for the characters leads to over-identification, making laughter less likely. When the pain is intentionally inflicted other opportunities are opened up for the characters to depict their pain and take it seriously whilst making the audience laugh. This will be explored in Chapter 6.

One live performance that does not have to concern itself with laughter being blocked by the action being taken too seriously is circus clowning. Circus clowns operate within one of the clearest comic frames. Societal expectations of clowns, particularly in Western society, are that they will make us laugh and that nothing they do should be taken too seriously. The performative nature of what the audience sees is emphasised by the mode of performance. The circus ring marks the performance area although a clown will happily transgress this and move out into the audience. The loud music, exaggerated sound effects and lighting emphasise the nature of the circus performance as sitting outside reality and making no pretensions towards naturalism. The audience are therefore not encouraged to make any empathetic or psychologically nuanced connection with any of the performers. In the case of the clowns this distancing effect is further enhanced by their make-up, red noses, extravagant hair and outlandish costumes. Two entrées will be considered here. The first is drawn from Tristan Remy's classic text

Clown Scenes (1997), in which the author provides the texts of 48 of what he regarded as the best clown entrées performed between the 1880s and the 1950s. As such the texts (like the *lazzi* and scenarios of *commedia*) do not indicate exactly how the scenes would have been performed but they given enough information for the reader to infer how the scenes may have worked and what physical actions may have taken place to supplement the outline on the page. The other pre-show routine considered is much more modern, being performed by the clowns of the Ringling Bros Red Unit in 2013. Taken together these entrées offer a good insight into the way in which the clown performance of accidental violence works and how it might affect an audience.

In 'The Poster', originally performed in 1935 by Manetti and Rhum, the clown (played by Manetti, a traditional whiteface) and the Auguste (played by Rhum) have been charged by the ringmaster (originally Georges Loyal) with the task of putting up posters. The two clowns work in the traditional circus double act of Clown and Auguste in which the Clown is the boss and the Auguste is the incompetent assistant although the Clown is more actively involved in the slapstick action than we might expect. When Clown and Auguste enter they are carrying trestles, a large board, rolls of paper, a pail and a large bar of soap. Given the circus context of the performance these props should immediately suggest a range of slapstick possibilities to the audience. Part of the pleasure to be had from watching the entrée lies in seeing which of the anticipated actions occurs and in being surprised by unanticipated actions. Initially the duo set up their working area. The Auguste puts the boards on the trestles but when he leans on one end it flies up. He avoids being hit by throwing the board behind him. It hits the Clown on the head. No indication is given in Remy's text of exactly how the Clown responds but this opening action establishes that audience anticipation about the slapstick possibilities of the props is likely to be fulfilled. The Clown corrects the position of the trestles, raising them up. The Auguste has gone to get the board and does not see this. He throws the board and hits the Clown in the back. When the Auguste puts the board on the trestles, he traps the Clown's finger. At this point the reaction is written into the text. The Clown shouts 'Ow! Ow! Ow!' The Clown has now been hurt three times as a result of the Auguste's incompetence. None of the pain has been deliberately inflicted. This entrée relies on a variety of slapstick rather than simply repeated pain so the next section involves much physical play while the Auguste and then the Clown try to roll out the papers and fail. This reinforces the notion of their incompetence which is increased by their consumption of frequent glasses of wine

poured from the bottle the ringmaster has ill-advisedly left for them. They move from the papers to pasting and the Auguste pastes over the back of the Clown who is lying on the table trying to keep the paper flat. The next example of accidental pain occurs when the Auguste, now pasting frantically because the ringmaster is watching him, pastes so fast that the brush slips out of his hand and hits the Clown in the face. The Clown strikes the board in anger and it flies up and hits the Auguste under the chin. The two are increasingly drunk and the Clown supports himself by leaning on the wall onto which they are supposed to put the posters. He staggers and the wall collapses. There is no indication in the text that he suffers pain at this point but it is entirely possible that the fall and the collapse of the wall could be performed in such a way that he is hit by the post or by other elements of the collapsing wall. As was the case when considering *commedia*, part of the difficulty of dealing with such performance texts as exist is that they can never give a full description of exactly how the physical action was executed. After this the Auguste rearranges the trestles and board then stands on the board which swings up and hits him in the face. The Clown laughs which gives the audience further encouragement, if it is needed, to find the repeated troubles of the duo funny by providing an onstage model of response. From this point the entrée moves into a slosh scene with the duo pouring paste and water over each other. The accidental nature of the pain they inflict is supported by the fact that they get more drunk as the entrée progresses. This helps to make the action believable because it provides a reason for their increasing inability to carry out the task assigned to them. In terms of the model, the comic pain action is very straightforward. The comic frame is firmly established by the circus location and the audience expectation in relation to clown activity. The task they are undertaking is easily understood by the audience, some of whom will have had experience of carrying out similar tasks. The performance skills are demonstrated through the timing of the duo and the precise application of pressure on the board to ensure that it behaves in the way the entrée demands. Most of the pain comes in the form of blows or trapping of fingers which the audience can empathise with readily. However, a sympathetic response is not necessary because the performance frame is strong and the circus audience knows that all the pain is performed. DIY scenes are rich in slapstick possibilities for clowns as is demonstrated by the next entrée to be considered.

The pre-show clown skit for the Ringling Bros Circus 143rd edition *Built to Amaze* (Ringling Brothers, 2013) involves a similar range of props as 'The Poster'. There are three clowns (C1, C2 and C3) involved

in this slapstick routine and they have some sort of DIY job to complete, the precise nature of which is not clear to the audience. They bring on a trestle table, a saw and a men-at-work sign. They also have a solid, working door through which to enter and exit. This door provides the first opportunity for the accidental infliction of pain when C2 goes to open the door just as C3 comes through it. C2 is hit in the face by the door and falls to the ground. In keeping with the cartoonish, non-realistic nature of clowns, he leaps to his feet and appears to suffer no lasting consequence. C3 brings on a bundle of plans and gives them to C1. Meanwhile C2 has recovered. C3 leans on the plank which is on the table. It pivots up and hits C2 under the chin knocking him out. A pattern of repetition is already being established in so far as C2 experiences most of the pain and the usual consequence is that he falls over. This expectation can either be fulfilled by C2 remaining the victim and falling over or it can be varied. The variation may take the form of a different clown being injured or by C2 reacting in a different way. In addition to setting up this expectation through their own actions, the clowns also rely on broader expectations. The potential of a plank in slapstick is well-established and there is a pre-existing expectation that if performers in a comic setting start using a plank then somebody will get hurt. The next action of the clowns plays with this expectation as C3 picks up the plank, holds it horizontally and wanders around. The other clowns move around too but the audience knows that somebody will get hit as C3 turns round and round. It is C1 who gets hit, on the bottom. This constitutes a variation in two ways. The expected victim so far has been C2 and the reaction so far has been for the clown to fall over. Instead C1 stumbles a little, dives along the table and does a forward roll off the end of the end of the table. There is a higher level of skill involved here which gives the audience both variation and a sense of pleasure at seeing a stunt performed well. It is also an unrealistic consequence and so it reinforces the performative nature of the sketch and reassures the audience that there is no real consequence to the clowns' clumsy actions. Throughout the sketch the plank is manoeuvred so that C2 is hit repeatedly in a variety of ways. One of these stunts requires particularly precise timing in order to achieve the hit without causing any actual damage. C3 picks up the plank from the floor and swings it up and over his shoulder just as C2 comes up behind him. The plank hits C2 on the head and knocks him out. The timing of the connection between plank and clown's head has to be just right in order to convince the audience that contact has been made without there being any real force in the blow.

The clowns move into a tumbling routine which sees C1 and C2 tumbling and diving over the table. This sets up a different trick in which C2 (ever the victim) accidentally inflicts pain on himself. He stands on the table and does a back somersault to get off, but as he flips he hits his chin on the table and knocks himself out. As none of the previous knockings out have had any real consequence, the audience are free to laugh as before but there may be more of an ouch reaction this time because the audience can imagine how much more painful this would be than the previous knocks with a plank. The skill level of the trick is also higher so the viewer is less likely to believe that his or her body could match the action. Disembodied identification follows as a consequence. C2 gets to his feet and staggers around so the audience is reassured that no significant damage has been done. When the clowns exit they offer a repetition of a previous trick with a variation in reaction. C1 and C3 exit through the door. C2 follows. C3 shuts the door just as C2 reaches it. C2 hits his face and falls backwards. Up to this point this is a simple repetition of what has gone before and the skill level is not high. The audience can match their bodies to the action and imagine what it might feel like to be hit in this way. However, C2's fall is not simple. He falls backwards but never lands on his back because he flips over from his head so that he lands on his stomach. The skill level here is high. The reaction emphasises the lack of reality in the action thus far and reminds the audience that the performers are highly skilled and able to react physically in ways that the audience could not possibly hope to imitate.

There is an element of this unattainable level of skill in the next example to be considered. Beyond impressing with skill, Norman Wisdom's incompetent 'little man' character, Norman Pitkin, offers the audience many opportunities to feel superior while also managing to attract their sympathy by being decent and honourable. The comic frame of these films is established largely by Wisdom's reputation. The broad appeal of his slapstick style means that many more of his films could have been included here but the focus will be on *Man of the Moment* and *The Early Bird*, films made 10 years apart, because they provide some sense of the continuity of Wisdom's characterisation and slapstick skill. These two elements make a major contribution to audience expectations of his films. Equally important is the costume Wisdom wears as Pitkin. His standard costume is a tweed suit. The jacket is far too small for him and he wears it with one button done up. He usually wears a cap at an odd angle with the peak turned upwards. When the plots of his films call for him to change costume it is often as a result of an accident or because he

has traded costumes with somebody else. These costumes (for example, Mitchell's dress suit in *Man of the Moment* or the fire chief's uniform in *The Early Bird*) are always far too big for Pitkin. This reinforces the notion of Wisdom/Pitkin as clown and the overly long sleeves and trouser legs provide more opportunities for him to trip, fall or become tangled up. Wisdom's physical characterisation of Pitkin also contributes to the comic frame. Pitkin's walk often begins with a little skip and his way of walking involves much more swinging of his arms than is usual. His propensity for tripping over things also increases the idea of Pitkin as a comic character, marking him out as in some way other. Close-ups of Wisdom's facial expressions as Pitkin also support this idea. The chosen films also provide a range of examples of accidental pain inflicted by Pitkin on himself and on other characters. *The Early Bird* (the later of the two films) is more excessive in its use of slapstick. On the other hand, *Man of the Moment* relies heavily on simple slapstick falls, bumps and trips which occur as a result of Pitkin's well-meaning incompetence.

By the time *Man of the Moment* was released in 1955, Wisdom was already a well-known comic performer so his reputation and his appearance in character as Pitkin would have been enough to establish the comic frame. Further reinforcement of the comic frame of the film is provided early in the action. Pitkin has been called to a meeting room in the Ministry of Overseas Affairs to deliver some files. He bumps into the tea boy outside the room and is left to take in both the files and the tea trolley. All the men in the room therefore believe he is the tea boy and are irritated by his incompetence in that role. He drops the sugar bowl, scattering sugar cubes on the floor under the table. He climbs under the table to retrieve them. When he is called he tries to stand upright under the table. The force with which he stands sends one end of the table flying up so that it hits the gentleman chairing the meeting under the chin. Once the table is on an incline it pins down the gentleman at the other end of the table and the full teacups slide down to land in his lap. Given the arrogance of the men in the meeting room and Pitkin's eagerness to do what is right the audience's sympathy are likely to lie with him. In applying the model to this sequence the viewer will be readily able to imagine their bodies in the place of those being hurt, resulting in embodied understanding. As the performative nature of the pain is clear the audience is likely to laugh, knowing that the performers are not doing anything dangerous or particularly difficult. The audience may also side with Pitkin and feel some sense of justice that these unpleasant men have been a little hurt and inconvenienced.

A twist in the plot results in Pitkin having to travel to Geneva to an important political conference as a member of the British delegation. He has to have his passport photograph taken. When he arrives at the photographer's studio, he unwittingly sits on a hot stove. Although he reacts to the pain he does not get up until the photographer tells him to. This gives the audience a chance to feel superior. Most people will recognise the pain of a burn, but it is unlikely that they had to be told to remove their body part from the heat source. In the same scene Pitkin is knocked out by a pillar which falls on him when it is pulled over by some wires in which he has become entangled. These two examples, coming so close together, serve to establish Pitkin's inability to function in the way we might expect of an employed adult. The innocent nature of the accidental injuries establishes an atmosphere in which we can laugh at his mishaps whilst still being able to sympathise with him for his inability to get things right.

When he arrives with the delegation at the hotel in Geneva no room has been booked for him and he ends up in staff quarters on the seventh floor of the hotel. His room only has a skylight so Pitkin climbs onto the back of a chair so that he can open the window and look at the view. Inevitably the chair slips and Pitkin is left hanging, several feet above the floor trying to keep himself from falling. Whilst the viewer sees the character Pitkin struggling and is likely to be amused he or she will also be aware that the performer, Wisdom, is demonstrating strength and physical skill in the performance of this sequence. If the viewer matches their body to the performer's body they are likely to come to the conclusion that they could not achieve what Wisdom achieves. Dangling from a height he holds on to the windowsill whilst turning the rest of his body through 180 degrees so that he can try to launch himself to the relative safety of the bed. He does so and the bed collapses beneath him. At this point the viewer is likely to be in a state of unidentified embodied understanding in so far as they recognise that such moves and strength are possible, but not for them. This example is one which contains rehearsed or performed pain. There is no evidence of any wires and the stunt is evidently carried out by Wisdom himself but the pain he suffers does not seem to have much consequence. The viewer may well laugh in appreciation, recognising the skill of the performer and understanding that no real harm has been done to either character or performer.

The window provides another opportunity for accidental pain later in the film. Pitkin decides to empty his bowl of washing water out of the window. The height of the window means that he has to balance the

bowl on the end of a mop in order to get it high enough to tip the water out. Inevitably, perhaps, he tips not only the water but the whole bowl out of the window. The bowl falls and hits Mitchell, another member of the British delegation, who is standing on the balcony below, on the head and knocks him unconscious. The comic frame established before the film has been strengthened by Pitkin's antics thus far and the viewer can easily match his or her body to that of the victim. He was simply standing in the wrong place at the wrong time. The blow is clearly performed rather than actual. The bowl is almost certainly a prop designed to break on impact so that the knock-out can be performed without risk for the actor. As the bowl falling is entirely unplanned on Pitkin's part the viewer is able to laugh at Mitchell's incapacitation without having to pass judgement on Pitkin. This accident, however, has more consequences than the earlier examples. Mitchell remains unconscious for some time and has to be taken away in an ambulance. This triggers an important plot development. Pitkin who has only been with the British delegates as their filing clerk has to become a full delegate so that Britain is not disadvantaged in a key vote the following day. Pitkin's presence at the vote, where he unintentionally actions his country's right to veto a proposal, propels the rest of the plot of the film.

Later in the film, Pitkin's unintentional and incompetent actions save his life. He has been lured into a trap where some of his opponents intend to kill him. He is repeatedly asked to go into the bedroom to bring objects for a film star with whom he is besotted. Every time he enters the bedroom he trips and stumbles and in doing so avoids the shots that are intended to kill him. Here then the trips and falls that are so strongly associated with slapstick performance are used, in a neat twist, to avoid pain and injury rather than to cause it.

The climax of the film is a chase sequence. Now a famous diplomat, Pitkin is being interviewed in a television studio. His fiancée watches from a room above. He glances up to see her being abducted by the same thugs who had earlier tried to kill him. He gives chase. The thugs drag his fiancée, Penny, through a series of television studios interrupting the programmes being filmed in each one. The first scene to be interrupted is a cookery programme. The chef is so shocked he drops his bowl of soufflé mixture and Pitkin slips in it and falls. This is a classic example of a slapstick fall and it has much in common with the pantomime slosh scenes discussed earlier. In another scene Pitkin is hit over the head; in the third scene one of the thugs falls off a catwalk; and in the final scene Pitkin falls down a flight of stairs. The performative nature of these injuries is doubly reinforced by the idea of film

characters interrupting other scenes which are being filmed. This draws the cameras, lights and directors onto the screen, acting as a further reminder that we are watching a constructed performance. As with the earlier scenes none of the injuries has any real consequence and Pitkin is able to rescue his fiancée.

The slapstick action in *The Early Bird* is much more elaborate. It becomes a structural device in terms of introducing characters and developing plot. There is also a much stronger element of excess in the scenes towards the end of the film which involve a fake fire and the involvement of the fire brigade. As with *Man of the Moment* the comic frame is well established before the film begins. However, *The Early Bird* opens with an extended slapstick sequence which provides an excellent example of the way slapstick can be used to create anticipation and expectation. It also centres on a repeated physical gag which provides the opportunity for a consideration of repetition, inversion and escalation.

As the film opens Pitkin (Wisdom) is in bed. He is fast asleep and oblivious to the ringing of his alarm clock. He is woken by Mr Grimsdale and sets about making tea and running a bath even though he is stumbling around not fully awake. The opening sequence includes five falls down the stairs: three involving Pitkin and two involving Grimsdale. This plays with the slapstick technique of repetition and escalation. Firstly Mr Grimsdale falls, then Pitkin, then Grimsdale again. This builds a pattern of anticipation each time one of them approaches the top of the stairs which is fulfilled when they fall. That both of them fall is an early indicator that whilst the audience expectation may be that most of the slapstick will come from Wisdom's performance he will not be the only source. The fourth fall introduces variation and also increases the level of skill required to make the fall. This time Pitkin is on his way up the stairs, carrying a cup of tea. Near the top he falls and slides down the stairs on his stomach, his body held rigid with the hand holding the cup of tea outstretched. At the bottom of the stairs he stands and the viewer sees that the tea cup is still full. This is reminiscent of Arlecchino's *lazzo* with the wine glass. Analysing it in relation to the comedy pain model produces an interesting distinction from the earlier Wisdom examples. As before, the comic frame is firmly established by reputation, early action and the style of the accompanying music. Viewers may go some way towards embodied understanding as many of us have fallen down the stairs. However, it is unlikely that the viewer will believe that their body could match the skill of Wisdom and the controlled manner of slide down the stairs. When the viewer

evaluates the pain, the situation is also more complex than in earlier examples. The pain is clearly performed but the viewer is aware that in performing the stunt Wisdom risks actual pain as he slides down the stairs. The viewer cannot be certain that actual pain is involved but the nature of the stunt and the importance of the tea cup being full at the end of the fall raises questions about how many times the stunt had to be rehearsed and performed before it was captured on film. The laughter response combines pleasure at seeing a stunt well performed with an element of surprise. The full tea cup may well provoke a surprise laugh as this is the element of the stunt that is least likely to be anticipated. There is also likely to be some laughter of recognition because falling is a recognised trope of slapstick performance and within this film this trope has been particularly well established by its early repetition and demonstration by more than one performer.

The final fall of this sequence also involves a level of skill from which the viewer is likely to experience pleasure. At the top of the stairs Pitkin stumbles. He grabs at the wall to steady himself. A piece of the wallpaper comes away and he trips down the stairs, spinning in circles so that by the time he reaches the bottom, the wallpaper is wrapped around him, having come off the wall in one long strip. Once more he keeps the tea in the cup. Repetition is working in a number of ways here. The retention of the tea can be anticipated this time as he has already succeeded in doing this once. The trip is also expected, but the style of the trip is unusual and introduces elements of absurdity. For Wisdom to end up wrapped in the wallpaper may be uncomfortable, but it is unlikely to cause pain. However, the reality/performance duality ensures that the audience is aware that in pulling off a stunt that does not depict pain, Wisdom is at risk of suffering actual pain. The wallpaper severely restricts his movement, making an actual fall more likely. When he performs the stunt safely the laughter signifies both pleasure and relief.

This is, apparently, the end of this running gag and the action of the film moves elsewhere. However, right at the end of the film in a moment of cyclical structuring we are returned to the stairs and the fall. In the final moments of the film Pitkin once again stands at the top of the stairs. He turns to smile at the bedroom door which conceals Mr Grimsdale and his lady. Pitkin then falls backwards in a rolling tumbling fall as the words 'The End' appear on the screen. This return to an already well-established physical gag facilitates a laugh of recognition. Whilst the fall looks as if it could cause pain to the performer the fact that the stunt has been repeated so many times in course of the film

implies that Wisdom is able to do these kinds of fall without causing too much actual pain or injury to himself.

Inter-cut with the initial sequence of falls is the threat of explosion from the bathroom water heater. Pitkin goes to light the heater and switches on the gas, only to discover there are no matches. He goes downstairs to get matches but is distracted by making the tea. Mr Grimsdale is in the bathroom when Pitkin finally arrives with the matches. The gas has been flowing for some time so the audience is in a state of anticipation. Grimsdale pushes Pitkin out of the bathroom and closes the door. The musical soundtrack emphasises that the scene is heading towards a moment of climax and then there is an explosion. The damage is not shown immediately, delaying the fulfilment of expectation. Pitkin goes downstairs to Mrs Hoskins's room. At this point the consequence of the explosion is shown. A hole has been blown in the floor of the bathroom and Mr Grimsdale has fallen through, landing in her bed. There is a cartoonish lack of reality to the depiction of the explosion here. He should have been seriously injured but there is no sign of injury and he has landed safely on a bed.

Unreality and performance

Later on in the film there are other examples of this unreality, in the depiction of the consequences of falls in particular. In disguise as a vicar, Pitkin has followed the head of Consolidated Dames (Grimsdale's rival firm) to the golf course. As a result of Pitkin's interference Hunter's golf ball becomes lodged in a tree. Refusing to concede the game, Hunter and Pitkin climb the tree so that Hunter can play the shot. Both Hunter and Pitkin fall from the tree. The first fall is signalled shot by shot to build audience anticipation. Hunter dangles head downwards with Pitkin holding his legs to try to reach the golf ball. He asks to be lowered. Pitkin holds his trouser legs and the next shot is of the buttons holding Hunter's braces to his trousers. The buttons pop off and the consequence is inevitable. The fall is shown in long shot so that the audience is reminded of the height of the drop involved. In watching this the audience is aware of the possibility that Jerry Desmond, the actor playing Hunter, is wired. It is unlikely that Wisdom could have held him in the way the scene demands. So in evaluating the pain, the audience is aware of the rehearsed nature of the scene. As soon as Hunter has fallen, the audience sees a close-up of him sitting up. As with the explosion earlier, the expected consequence is not shown. He has fallen headfirst 20–30 feet from a tree but has no obvious injuries. Moments later Pitkin falls and is also uninjured. This repetition of the

lack of consequence emphasises for the audience that the performance of the accidents is cartoonish in nature, reminding the viewer of the unreal and performed nature of the stunt. There may be an element of shock in the laughter because in real life the fall would cause serious injury.

Excess

The final example of slapstick in *The Early Bird* to be considered here represents an example of the way in which slapstick can be excessive in terms of its action and in terms of its production values (and therefore production costs). Pitkin visits Hunter at his home to challenge him about Consolidated Dairies' treatment of Grimsdale's. Hunter is mowing his lawn. Pitkin wrenches the mower from him and promptly loses control of it. It is an extended sequence which moves between long shots designed to show the scope of the damage Pitkin causes and close-ups which give an indication of Pitkin's response to his situation. Clinging to the handle of the mower, Pitkin is dragged through hedges, through canes supporting plants, through a second hedge before smashing through the glasshouse which collapses around him. He then lands in Hunter's large ornamental pond. An underwater sequence highlights the absurdity of what is going on. He emerges from the lake still clinging to the mower before crashing into a tree which puts a final stop to his troubles. The pain that Pitkin inflicts on himself is accidental. He has no idea that mower will run away with him. As the sequence extends the viewer becomes less and less able to maintain a level of embodied understanding. Many people might be able to imagine a lawn-mower or something similar running away with them but Pitkin's tenacity in refusing to let go puts the physical action firmly out of the normal range of human activity. The sequence is excessive in terms of the cost of the set that is wrecked as Pitkin is dragged along. It also constitutes the most risky slapstick in this film. Although the comic frame is secure, aided by close-ups of Pitkin's facial expressions, it is hard to watch this sequence without considering the risk to Wisdom as he performs it. The viewer may be aware that the sequence is carefully rehearsed and has been risk-assessed but it is hard to imagine that Wisdom escaped without some injury and this results in a laughter response which may be muted by concern.

Earlier the slapstick potential of a plank was explored in relation to the clown entrée presented by the Ringling Bros Barnum and Bailey Circus. The next example focuses on a double act and their interactions with

and inability to control the plank they need in order to finish their job. The comic frame of *The Plank* was established for a contemporary audience to a large extent before the film even began and its action is such that the audience is unlikely to have their laughter muted by concerns for the performers' safety. It starred and was written and directed by Eric Sykes who, by the time the film was released in 1967, was well known as a performer having been seen on small screens in 59 episodes of *Sykes and a...* which aired between 1960 and 1965. He was also well respected as a writer, having contributed to both *The Tony Hancock Show* (between 1956 and 1957) and *That Was The Week That Was* in 1962. Viewers coming to the film via video or DVD in the twenty-first century are still likely to recognise Sykes, given his longevity and continued success as a writer and performer. When the rest of the cast list is considered (and the credits run at the opening rather than the close of the film) the audience could hardly have anticipated anything other than a comedy. The cast included Tommy Cooper, who took on the other lead role opposite Sykes, and other comic performers such as Roy Castle, Jim Dale (of *Carry On!* fame), Jimmy Tarbuck, John Junkin, Bill Oddie and Jimmy Edwards. The style of the credits also contributes to the sense of comedy as they are sung incongruously in a call and response fashion reminiscent of a sung church service. The opening sequence shows Tommy Cooper wandering around a timber yard to the sound of disembodied laughter. The comic frame has been established before the audience witness any slapstick action. To further ready the audience the two stars of the show are introduced using what are effectively *lazzi* involving the plank (which has also been introduced via the credits). The first of these *lazzi* shows Cooper eating a banana. The plank appears behind him and knocks him on the back of the head so that he plunges face first into the banana and when he lifts his head he is wearing the banana as a false nose. Sykes's *lazzo* follows. He sits to pour himself a drink and the plank appears behind him. As it begins to swing, he bends forward to drink so that when the plank swings fully forward, it misses him. The plank then hits his drink on its swing back, spilling the drink all over him. The rudiments of slapstick are demonstrated here. Comic timing is displayed as is the development of repetition and variation. After Cooper has been hit, the audience assumes Sykes will be hit. When the blow comes, though, it is not the blow that the audience might have been expecting.

The basic premise of the film is that Cooper and Sykes are workmen on a building site. They are laying floorboards but cannot finish the job because Sykes has cut up what would have been the final floorboard to

DEMO

use as firewood. Both absurdity and incompetence are introduced in this action. It is a highly implausible act and, in doing it, Sykes proves his incompetence. The sense of absurdity is reinforced when the milkman comes to deliver a pint of milk. Sykes struggles to open the window, jiggling the handle and fiddling with the lock. He then reaches through the window, revealing there is no glass, fixes the lock, opens the window and only then takes the milk. He turns back to work, leaving the window open and Cooper, indicating that he is cold, gets up and closes the (glassless) window. What follows is the pair's quest to obtain a plank to complete the floor.

None of the examples of pain in the film are of any great consequence individually and on most occasions the pair are completely unaware of the pain and difficulty they are causing for other people. In fact, their inability to hold on to the plank ensures that it is not always in their possession when it causes damage. The minor and accidental nature of most of the pain depicted ensures that when the audience members witness it, they are able to recognise what the pain might feel like and, as most of the victims are caught unawares, it is relatively easy for the audience to imagine themselves in the victim's position. The first example of comic pain that we witness relies heavily on building audience anticipation. Pausing from their attempts to get the plank on to the roof of their car, Cooper and Sykes leave the plank so that it forms a ramp into a nearby lorry. At that moment a number of cyclists ride past, apparently taking part in a road race. As each small group approaches the ramp the audience anticipates that one or more of them will cycle up it. Finally a lone cyclist rides straight up the plank and into the lorry. We do not see the immediate consequence but we hear excessive crashing sounds from within. The cyclist then emerges from the cab with one of his wheels around his neck. The accidental nature of what has occurred to him simply as a consequence of riding a bike means that most viewers will be able to match their physical ability to that of the performer, ensuring embodied identification. The cartoonish nature of the outcome of the crash is signalled by the wheel around the cyclist's neck as he emerges. Had the accident been bad enough to cause that much damage to the bike then the cyclist would probably have been too severely injured to walk away from the accident. Thus when the audience assesses the reality of the pain the conclusion will be that this is definitely performed and that whilst the character appears to be hurt the performer is perfectly safe. The audience is aided in this assumption by the fact that the moment of the crash is not seen. The next example is also clearly accidental and appears to have no real

consequence. A running joke is set up regarding the doors on Sykes's car. When one door is slammed shut the other swings open. So when Cooper slams the passenger door, the driver's side door swings out into the road and crashes into a character played by Roy Castle, knocking him over so that he drops what he is carrying. The comic frame of *The Plank* is well established by this point but Castle's character is distanced further from reality by the excessive and obviously artificial wig he is wearing. He gets up and goes on his way so the audience is free to laugh at this simple example of performed accidental pain. There is no moral judgement to be made as no injury was intended and the consequence appears minimal. In my final example, the plank is on top of the car which is travelling along the road between a van and a large lorry. The three vehicles stop at a set of traffic lights. The front end of the plank becomes wedged in the back of the van and the rear end of the plank becomes wedged in the front of the lorry behind. When the traffic starts moving, Sykes turns left in the car and the plank remains suspended between the two other vehicles. At the next junction the vehicle in front brakes sharply and the plank shoots into the cab of the van, hits the woman sitting in the middle in the back of the head and knocks her out. The driver and the other passenger are unaware of what has happened. When the woman slumps against the driver, he interprets it as a flirtatious move and puts his arm around her. Whilst the injury appears potentially serious the audience is not shown any shocked response to what has occurred and, given that this is one element in a whole chain of events involving the plank, is likely to find the events humorous rather than distressing. As the film continues all those who have been in any way hurt by the plank appear at the police station shouting about what has happened to them. This confirms that there are no serious consequences for the victims of the accidents. The gentle nature of the accidents, particularly for a twenty-first-century audience, frees a laughter response. This response may also be encouraged by the fact that most of the accidents can be anticipated and so the audience has the added pleasure of feeling superior in two ways.

Consequential pain

The accidentally self-inflicted pain in *There's Something about Mary* appears to have more consequence than any of the minor bumps in *The Plank*. Whilst it is true that there is variation in the nature and consequence of the accidental pain, what the two films have in common is their clearly established comic frame. The film poster showed an

image of Cameron Diaz with a yellow banner across the image reading 'Warning: The guys who did "Dumb and Dumber" and "Kingpin" bring you a love story'. This draws attention to the fact that the film was written and directed by the Farrelly brothers who were already well known for working in the comedy genre, as evidenced by *Dumb and Dumber* (1994) and *Kingpin* (1996). Cameron Diaz, the female lead, had established a reputation for comedy performance in *The Mask* (1994), *She's the One* (1996), *Head Above Water* (1996) and *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997). When the film was released, co-star Ben Stiller was less well known but had paid his comedy dues with a year on *Saturday Night Live* in 1989 and with his own show, the satirical *Ben Stiller Show*, in 1992. In this way publicity and the reputations of those involved with the film would have meant that the audience would come to the film with high expectations of comedy. Given the Farrelly brothers' previous work the audience may also have been primed for something a little out of the ordinary.

Our focus here is on the sequence which takes place when Ted Stroehmann, played by Ben Stiller, is about to take his dream date to their high school prom. The comedy potential of the scene is established from the moment the front door of the girl's house is answered. The door is opened by a black man (Mary's stepfather but unknown to Ted). First he implies that Ted has come to the wrong house and then he says that Mary has already left with her boyfriend. It is only when Mary's mother comes to the door that Ted is allowed into the house. When Mary goes to adjust her dress, Ted goes to the bathroom. As he goes to the toilet he gazes out of the window and an idealised romance sequence begins in which he sees love birds cooing together while we hear the sound track of 'Why do birds suddenly appear?' As he gazes at the birds they fly off; the sound track breaks off abruptly and Mary and her mother come into focus, framed in a window opposite. Mary's mother sees Ted and thinks he is spying on Mary. In a state of agitation, Ted turns away to zip up his trousers. We hear a sound effect of the zip crunching into something and Ted screams, his mouth open wide in agony. The camera then cuts to an exterior shot of the house. A mother and child are passing the house and Ted's screams are heard, scaring them away.

In relation to the model for assessing comic pain, the audience is likely to have recognised the comic frame, established as it is both by the reputation of the directors and by the filmic and performance techniques leading up to this sequence. The level of the viewer's instinctive physical understanding of the pain will clearly be affected by their gender. The

empathic understanding of a male viewer who may have experienced a similar situation will be much stronger than that of a female. A woman watching this sequence will understand the significance of Ted's reaction and may have seen similar reactions from male friends or relations in response to genital pain but her response will remain unidentified. Indeed when the step-father goes into the bathroom to see how Ted is getting on, he demonstrates the likely male response to Ted's problem. When he is told what has happened he instinctively cups his hands around his own genitals, as if for protection. When he finally sees what Ted has done he responds more strongly, shouting 'oh God' and reaching for his genitals again. The screen audience here models the appropriate initial shock response that the cinema audience might be feeling. At this point the audience may or may not be laughing at what has occurred. They have recognised the comic frame, seen that a joke is intended, they have matched their body to that of the performer to reach some level of embodied understanding. In terms of evaluating the pain the audience knows that the pain is performed. There is no need in this performance setting for the performer to be at any risk of actual pain. This is a strong influence on generating laughter as a response. If the audience shows appreciation at this stage through laughter, that laugh is likely to be visceral. It has almost been shocked out of us by the intensity of Ted's response.

However, the sequence does not end there. Mary's stepfather calls in her mother and then a policeman arrives at the open window. At this point in the sequence the level of absurdity is increased as Ted gathers an ever-growing audience. This ensures that his physical pain is aggravated by increasing levels of shame and humiliation. A fireman arrives, using his radio to call for back-up to help deal with the situation. It is now that the off-screen audience finally sees what Ted has done. The fireman's response of 'Holy Shit!' indicates the seriousness one last time before we see a close-up of Ted's genitals which shows that three separate sections of skin have been caught in the zip. The fireman finds the situation hilarious. He laughs openly and uses his radio to tell his colleagues 'to bring everybody; to bring a camera'. Now the off-screen audience is given a clear indication that laughter is an appropriate response, though the onscreen indicator of desired response sits deliberately uneasily with the close-up shot of Ted's genitals. For male viewers there is likely to be some sympathetic groaning mixed in with any laughter.

However, Ted's troubles are not yet over. The audience has witnessed his reaction to the initial pain; we have seen his humiliation at the hands of the adults around him; but the sequence is structured so

that the pain and injury escalate in the final moments. The policeman moves in to help free Ted's zip. The filming of this sequence reinforces the audience anticipation of what we suppose will be the climactic moment. The policeman counts 'a one' and the camera cuts to the step-father and Mary's mother cowering in anticipation. We cut back to the shot of the policeman and Ted. The count continues 'a two and a'. The word 'three' is never heard. Instead the camera cuts to outside the house, focusing on a paramedic shouting 'we got a bleeder'. This more serious consequence of Ted's accidental injury is not shown. Instead we see Ted on an ambulance trolley. The camera then pulls out to show crowds of onlookers. The trolley arrives at the ambulance. Mary asks if he is OK and the trolley collapses, crashing to the floor. When it is raised again he is holding his elbow and wincing. He now has a pain accidentally inflicted by the paramedics to go with the pain he inflicted on himself.

The level of consequence of the pain is unusual in this movie. As we saw in *The Plank* it is more common in slapstick for the injury to be minor. Even major injuries are usually shrugged off but Ted has caused himself enough damage to require hospitalisation. At the end of the sequence the scene changes to show us that what we have seen is Ted's memory of the event as he describes it to his therapist. That we should still not take any of this too seriously is indicated by the fact that his therapist has clearly been so bored he has slipped from the room and only creeps back in as Ted finishes recounting the story.

The contrast between these three cinematic examples is huge. In the earlier examples, drawn from the 1950s and 1960s the injuries are all innocent. They involve incompetence on the part of the protagonist(s) and the injuries are without significant consequence. It is therefore relatively easy for the audience to recognise the comic frame, match their ability to the that of the performers, assess the nature of the pain and demonstrate their appreciation. The example drawn from *There's Something about Mary* is a little less straightforward. The main example of self-inflicted accidental pain verges on what has come to be described as gross-out humour, particularly in the moment when the trapped genitals are shown in close-up. The pain also appears to be more serious and to have a longer lasting consequence. Whilst the audience would recognise the comic frame and, especially in the case of male viewers, be able to empathise with and understand the pain, the final step of demonstrating appreciation is likely to be more ambiguous, containing laughter, howls and groans. As my model for analysing pain suggests our responses to comedy are instinctive and happen so rapidly that there may be no time for an overtly cognitive response. It is possible

that some viewers will be offended by the fact that the injury is inflicted on the genitals and will, therefore, be less likely to laugh. Others may identify too closely with the nature of the injury to find it funny.

Incompetence

The programmes to be considered in relation to comic pain as a result of incompetence are taken from television and are unlikely to cause offence to anyone. The first sitcom considered here, *Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em* ran from 1973 to 1978, airing 22 episodes. Michael Crawford starred as Frank Spencer, the hapless protagonist who fails at everything he attempts. It is this consistent incompetence which leads to most of the difficult situations in which he finds himself. The comic frame is established initially by Michael Crawford's physicality. Like Norman Wisdom (to whom the role of Frank Spencer was offered) before him, Crawford as Spencer has a way of standing and moving that marks the character out as different from the norm. The sitcom also makes great use of close-ups on Spencer's facial expressions in the run up to something going wrong. The twitches and blinks, together with a slight tilt of the head indicate that he is out of his depth. After something has gone wrong close-ups are used to show his reaction which is often him putting one finger to the corner of his mouth and saying 'oohh'.

Much of the comic frame relies, therefore, on Crawford's physicality and on the interplay between that and choice of camera shot. The audience response to his scrapes and accidents is also affected by their sympathy for Spencer. There is no malice in this character. He never intends to do anybody any harm. Whilst other people's property may be damaged, most of the physical pain is inflicted on himself and other people rarely suffer as a result of Spencer's incompetence. It is clear that all the accidents and stunts involve Michael Crawford rather than a stunt double and this affects the way in which the audience respond. To know that the actor is taking personal risks sharpens our awareness of the risks involved and also increases our admiration for the performer's skill. Whilst there are some episodes which have set-piece routines which are quite lengthy, like the roller-skating episode discussed in Chapter 1, there are also many episodes with one-off moments of comic pain caused by Spencer's incompetence. The audience is therefore aware whilst watching that anything may happen at any moment. To watch *Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em* is to be in a state of heightened anticipation throughout.

Simple examples of Spencer's incompetence can be found in *The RAF Reunion* in which he is shut in a locker which falls downstairs; in *The*

Hospital Visit when a half-glazed door falls and breaks over him as he ties his shoes; and in *The Psychiatrist* in which he slides down a bowling lane and becomes trapped behind the pin replacement mechanism. In each of these episodes from 1973, the incident does not appear to cause Spencer any pain though in reality any one of these could lead to serious injury. The laughter response is initiated by the incident and furthered by the framing of Spencer's reactions. In the first example Spencer has been shut in the locker to keep him out of the way. When he calls his name and RAF number in response to roll call the locker tips on its side. The camera angle changes so that the audience sees the locker sliding down the stairs towards them. It tips over on its end and crashes through a railing before landing. Clearly, in life, such a fall would result in bruising, or concussion and/or broken bones. When Spencer climbs out he looks shaken and bewildered but there is no sign of any damage. According to www.comedy.co.uk the series makes use of a laughter track recorded from the live audience. In this example, the peaks of laughter occur as the locker tips and as Spencer emerges from the locker. The biggest laugh comes as he staggers, bewildered, to his feet. Whilst the audience laugh at the most dangerous moment of the stunt; they laugh more at Spencer's response to what has happened to him. In *The Hospital Visit* there is a more prolonged set-up to the accident. Spencer arrives home but cannot open the door. He climbs in through the kitchen window. He struggles, knocks things over and puts his foot in the sink which is full of water. He punches the door before bending down to wipe his shoe. At this point the door falls forward and the glass upper section smashes over his shoulders. An audience would realise that breakaway glass rather than real glass would be used in such a stunt, minimising the damage. Equally Crawford's position in relation to the door would have been calculated to ensure that he was not hit by the wooden frame. The audience laugh as the glass smashes but, as with the previous example, they laugh more as he stands and reacts to what has happened. He looks bewildered. He looks up, creating what Wright defined as a stop. He then stands and gives a half shrug. He turns and points at where the door should be. All of this creates the impression that he is both working out for himself what has happened and explaining it to the audience at the same time. The audience empathise with him. No particular physical skill has been displayed so they are in a state of embodied identification. It is clear that the pain is performed and no significant risk has been involved. The example drawn from *The Psychiatrist* is less simple in execution. Taken bowling by Betty, Frank fails to let go of the ball as he launches it at the pins. The audience is

given a greater sense of anticipation in this example. Frank thought they were going green bowling so it is clear that he does not know how to bowl in this context. Betty has to show him where to put his fingers in the bowling ball. Given Spencer's standard incompetence, the audience anticipates that something will not go according to plan. This is reinforced by Crawford's physicality. He clenches his fists and wriggles his arms, indicating that he is not comfortable. The camera focuses in a medium shot while he swings the ball back and forth and then pulls out into a long shot which allows the audience to see that Spencer has not let go of the ball but is shooting down the lane attached to it. The camera cuts to Betty's face to show her reaction and then back to Spencer as he hurtles towards the pins. He is then trapped behind the mechanism shouting 'Betty. It's swallowed me'. There is a cartoon quality to this stunt as the audience would be aware that even if he fell onto the lane in reality he would not generate enough pace to slide all the way down to the pins. This element of fantasy helps to provoke the laughter because it reminds the audience of the performative nature of what we are seeing. None of these simple accidents has involved much actual risk for Crawford as a performer. It has already been established that the audience instinctively assesses the risk involved and considers whether the pain and danger is real or performed. Thus far only the RAF locker has implied any possible threat to Crawford as a performer. The lack of cuts between the locker tipping and the zoom in on Crawford as the door crashes open at the bottom of the stairs means that Crawford must be inside the locker as it falls, with the consequent risk of bumps and bruises as the locker hits the stairs and crashes into the rail at the bottom.

A wide variety of examples of accidental pain have been considered in this chapter, drawn from both live and filmed performance. Filmed performances are often more complex and suggest greater levels of risk and pain. The opportunities afforded by being able to film, stop and re-film mean that writers, producers, directors and performers can take greater risks. There is also the possibility that a double could be used (though in the examples used here the performers did their own stunts) which allows for even greater risks to be taken. In a live performance physical risk must be limited because an accident could stop the show and jeopardise the rest of the run. It is also much harder to substitute a stunt double for an actor in live performance. The accidental nature of the pain considered in this chapter removes the consideration of desert and justice from the audience's response. In many cases the protagonist

is incompetent to the extent that the audience pities him and wishes to see him succeed. In these cases, even when the pain is inflicted on others rather than on the self, the audience is likely to forgive the perpetrator because of the lack of intent and because the accident is in keeping with previously displayed incompetence. This instinct to sympathise must never become so strong that it blocks the laughter though and this is why establishing the comic frame is such a key feature of the depiction of accidental pain. As Chapter 6 will demonstrate, the comic frame remains key when the pain is intentionally inflicted but other factors such as status and deservedness become more important.

The audience's response to accidental pain is generally direct and innocent. There is no need to apply moral judgements. The performance frame is established in such a way as to indicate that the action is potentially absurd and sometimes unrealistic. Any reference to status in terms of class difference or the age of characters is used to gain sympathy for the characters rather than to make any socio-political point. The most realistic portrayal of pain (and one where the pain appears to have significant consequence) occurs in the most recent example considered here, *There's Something about Mary*. This would appear to reflect the writer and director's desire to shock the audience and engage them viscerally with the action. This shift to a more visceral and graphic depiction of pain may indicate a shift in the way that audiences respond to pain at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

5

Random Pain: Objects and Animals

As has already been established some pain is intentional and some pain is accidental. Equally some pain is inflicted by other people and some pain is self-inflicted. However, a wide range of examples from theatre, film and television also demonstrate that not all pain is caused by other humans. Sometimes, both in life and performance, pain is caused by objects that do not behave in the ways that we expect or could reasonably have predicted. When objects cause pain it is not possible for us to attribute the pain to malice or incompetence on the part of the inanimate object. Consider the door blown by the wind so that it slams shut on the protagonist's fingers. Neither the door nor the wind has any conscious agency. They cannot set out to cause pain but pain may nonetheless be the result of their action. This is similar to the circumstances of accidental pain analysed in the previous chapter but the lack of a human agent must have an impact on the viewer's response. The absence of a person to blame for the pain (whether or not there is any human intention to cause pain) puts the viewer in a different position when responding to the pain. There is no judgement to be made as to which of the parties is more in the right because such a consideration is irrelevant in relation to objects. However, the audience might have to judge whether the pain caused by the object is realistic; a judgement that will in turn depend on whether the viewer believes that the object could, in reality, behave in the way depicted. Thus, for the examples considered here not only does the viewer make decisions as to the real or performed nature of the pain depicted but he or she also decides whether or not the incident is in any way realistic.

It is no surprise to find that the more extended examples of this kind of pain are to be found on film and television rather than in the theatre. The live performer taking risks in front of his or her audience is more

limited in the stunts available to them. Therefore, whilst examples from theatre, especially farce, are considered here, the more extended sequences are drawn from film and television where the mediated format allows directors and performers to construct much more excessive examples of what happens when objects run wild or behave unexpectedly. The large scale of sets and outdoor filming helps to establish a sense of credibility in the incident which may inhibit or release laughter depending on how the viewer assesses the potential for pain set against the risk to the performer. Contrasting with this element of credibility and referring to the examples considered in the previous chapter it appears that a lack of reality (a clear element of establishing a comic frame) is a key contributor to laughter provocation through slapstick violence and pain.

Troublesome props: live performance

Early examples of props misbehaving and causing injury can be found in *commedia dell'arte*. Clear examples of this can be seen in Arlecchino's various *lazzi* involving ladders. Gordon's (1983) descriptions of the *lazzi* are brief, not necessarily making clear where the comic pain may be involved. However, if we consider one or two *lazzi* in terms of how they may have been performed then the opportunities for props to cause comic pain are readily apparent. For example Gordon describes one *lazzo* as 'The ladder keeps slipping when placed against the wall' (p. 9). The opportunities here are various. The ladder can slip in such a way as to bang into Arlecchino's feet or shins whilst he stands near it. If he begins to climb it before it starts to slip then there is the possibility that he will fall. If his hands are around the edges of the ladder then his fingers may become trapped as the ladder hits either the wall or the floor. There would need to be some skilful handling of the prop to make the ladder look as if it had a will of its own. The audience may be aware of this skill. However in terms of attempting to climb a ladder they are likely to reach a state of embodied understanding. This is something they could certainly do. If Arlecchino's responses are excessive then this would underline the potentially cartoonish quality of the actions and the ensuing pain can be evaluated as performed rather than real.

Troublesome sets: live performance

The relatively simple set of *commedia dell'arte* to some extent limited the opportunities for mechanisms to go wrong or objects to misbehave to

those props which could easily be carried on and off stage. However, the more complex sets of farces written centuries later provide a much richer range of opportunities for both props and structure to cause comic pain to the performers. The source of much of the pain and difficulty in John Chapman's 1954 play *Dry Rot* is caused, as the title implies, by problems with the house in which the play is set. In this instance the comic frame would have been established before the audience arrived at the theatre. The initial run of this play was produced by Rix Theatrical Productions at the Whitehall Theatre. Both Brian Rix and the Whitehall Theatre were synonymous with farce at this period of Britain's theatrical history. *Dry Rot* was such a success that the initial run lasted from August 1954 until March 1958. Beyond the production company and theatre, Rix's reputation as a performer of farce would also have played a part in attracting an audience who expected to spend the evening laughing. According to Smith, *Dry Rot* offers a 'first attempt by Chapman to create a double act, reminiscent of a music hall turn.... This involved Alf and Fred, with Alf as the accomplished trickster, knowing and manipulative, and Fred as the stooge and incompetent accomplice' (1989, p. 77). The comic frame is, therefore, layered through expectation and through the use of a widely recognised performative trope. The double act that Smith describes relates closely to the double acts discussed in Chapter 2. The duo differ in status and in intellect. The two of them are involved in a slapstick routine in act 3 in which Fred (played by Rix) is trying to learn how to ride a horse by pretending that the sofa is one. By assigning a function to the sofa which it does not usually fulfil the playwright creates an object which the performer no longer knows how to deal with. Alf (played by John Slater) attempts to help Fred mount the 'horse' by putting his hands together to make a step:

ALF Well, come on, try it. Put your left foot in my hand.

(Fred does so)

Now throw the right one over.

(He does so and shoots straight over the top).

FRED Ow!!

(Act 3, p. 96)

Fred has already been established as incompetent and the suddenness of his leap up and fall would be likely to provoke a surprise laugh from the audience the first time that it happens. Despite his cry of 'Ow!', he is back on his feet quickly, indicating that no real damage has been done. The audience are able to feel superior at this point; safe in the

knowledge that should they decide to pretend a sofa were a horse, they could probably mount it successfully. Less than a page later the fall is repeated and, on this occasion, it will provoke a laugh of repetition as the audience will have anticipated that Fred will fall again. It appears that there will be a rule of three pattern but on his final attempt Fred manages to stay on the sofa, avoiding pain and thus disappointing the audience's expectation.

Beyond the double act much of the comic pain in the play is provoked by the hole in the stairs caused by the dry rot of the title. The potential for the dry rot to cause problems is planted in the minds of the audience very early in the play when Susan says to Danby 'keep in the middle of the stairs as much as possible... There's a spot of dry rot along the edge' (pp. 12–13). Given the nature of farce the planting of this information indicates that some comic action is likely to ensue. The pay-off does not occur until act 2. Polignac the French jockey has arrived. He has become very angry because he cannot make himself understood. He rushes up the stairs before anyone can remember the French for dry rot. As a result Polignac 'takes one more step upstairs, and his foot goes clean through the woodwork and he lands with his chin on the banisters' (p. 58). There is some skill involved in achieving the fall. In order to be convincing the actor's foot must go down onto the stair without there being any physical indication of the fall which the actor knows he must make. There must also be an element of physical control to ensure that the actor's chin ends up on the banister. The audience members are likely to experience embodied empathy because walking upstairs and falling is a relatively common experience. The audience can imagine what such a fall might feel like. Polignac's reaction is to swear repeatedly in French. This indicates that he has been hurt but his anger and the sound of the French words would create a comic moment, particularly as it is followed promptly by the curtain coming down for the end of the scene. The audience has had to wait a long time for the anticipation – which was set up on page 12 – to be fulfilled on page 58. The anticipation is heightened by the dialogue on page 58 in which Danby and Wagstaff try to work out the French for dry rot. This reminds the audience of the danger and alerts them to the fact that something is about to happen. Being readied in this way ensures that the audience is more likely to laugh. The joke is repeated at the end of the act when Sergeant Fire 'puts her foot firmly down the hole in the stairs and shouts for help'. This occurs just before the curtain falls. In this way the moments of pain caused by the house falling apart are emphasised by their positioning just before the curtain falls.

Effectively the audience sees a snapshot of pain. The suddenness of each fall, combined with the growing anticipation and the limited duration of the pain combine to provoke laughter. The repetition goes some way towards objectifying the victims because the more often the joke occurs the less realistic it appears to the audience. Each repetition highlights the structural and theatrical nature of the action. The climax comes in the final stage directions of the play which indicate that the stairs collapse as Fred, Flash and Alf run down them. Chapman recognises 'the difficulties involved in a "collapsing staircase"' (1985, p. 109) but if the staircase could be constructed in such a way as to collapse then it would provide a fitting climax to the dry rot running gag. Two people have already fallen foul of it so this example would constitute the final step in a rule of three execution of the gag. It is also an example of escalation because in each of the previous instances a single character was simply trapped whereas this time three characters are involved in a total collapse of the staircase. As before the incident is positioned immediately before the curtain falls so the consequences are brief, and should anything go wrong immediate assistance can be offered as soon as the curtain falls. The nature of live performance ensures that the audience is aware that the performers are taking some physical risk but the actions that they perform are physically simple. The audience is likely, therefore, to be in a state of embodied empathy, judging the risk to be minor and, as this action offers the final laugh of the farce, the laughter release is likely to be free and extended. It is unlikely that the audience would have anticipated that the staircase would collapse so there will also be an element of pleasurable surprise in this conclusion to the play.

If the realistic sets of twentieth-century farce provided writers and performers with a wide range of opportunities, the potential of film comedy was even greater. The ability of film to be able to pause the action, rig a special effect, substitute a stunt double and make use of both interior and exterior locations means that a much wider range of props and objects (for example whole houses and vehicles) can be used to inflict pain on a range of unsuspecting victims. Early examples of this are found in the films of, for example, Keaton and Chaplin.

Troublesome props: filmed performance

Modern Times (1936) provides us with a sequence which revolves around an object that will not operate in the way it is expected to. Within the sequence this cannot be attributed to the incompetence of either the victim or those who are operating the machine. It occurs because, for

no clear reason, the machine malfunctions. This sequence (in which Chaplin's character is the guinea pig upon whom an automatic feeding device is tested) not only provides slapstick humour but relates directly to the thematic concerns of the film. As is indicated from the film's title, *Modern Times* offers a critical view of the increasing industrialisation and mechanisation of society. In this sequence the inventor of a feeding machine has arrived to demonstrate how its use could save the factory owner time and money by feeding the workers efficiently. The workers are already being treated as objects to be refuelled as quickly as possible. No consideration is given as to whether they might need to rest as well as to eat.

The complex nature of the feeding device may establish a sense of early anticipation in the viewer. When it is taken out onto the factory floor and Chaplin is chosen as the worker on whom the device will be demonstrated this anticipation increases. The feeding process begins well but, as in other examples of slapstick performance, a sound effect is used to indicate that something is about to go wrong. A loud electrical buzzing is heard and then the rotating corn-on-the-cob feeder from which Chaplin is eating begins to speed up. Of course, even before anything untoward happens, Chaplin's reputation as a performer goes some way to establishing a comic frame for the film. Prior to this sequence his inability to interact effectively with machines has been shown when he cannot stop physically jerking even when he is taking a rest from his place on the production line. The viewer is, therefore, primed to find Chaplin's actions amusing. As the corn-on-the-cob feeder goes into overdrive the close-up of Chaplin's facial expressions is designed to provoke laughter on the part of the viewer. The rubbing of the corn against Chaplin's face is likely to be perceived as uncomfortable but it does not look as if it would cause severe pain so the viewer is free to laugh without needing to engage in any decisions as to the morality or deservedness of the pain. However, this changes as the sequence continues. The speed reaches a point where the action must be painful. At one point it stops, adjusts slightly and then rubs against his nose instead of his mouth. His facial expressions become more extreme, indicating that he is in more pain. However, as the viewer is likely to have been enjoying his discomfort up to this point it is possible that this enjoyment will continue even with the awareness that more pain is now involved. Unusually for Chaplin, he does not have to demonstrate any skill in this sequence and the viewer will be able to match their body to his with ease. Close-up shots of his reactions alternate with shots of the machine's inventor desperately trying to bring

it back under control. This inter-cutting supports the film's narrative about the tension between man and machine. It could be argued that the pain depicted here is, at least in part, a result of human incompetence but the human's influence on the machine is so ineffectual that the feeding machine is established as a self-directed object. When an inter-title is shown which says 'we'll try with the soup again', the audience is readied for further mishap. They are likely to anticipate that the second attempt will not go well. Indeed the first bowl of soup is tipped over Chaplin. His reaction once more indicates discomfort rather than pain. Structurally, having been taken to something approaching a climax with the speed of the corn-feeder, this section allows both performer and audience to relax prior to another escalation. The escalation also includes elements that stress the lack of reality surrounding the situation. As he fiddles with the machine, the inventor places two metal nuts on one of the plates of the mechanical feeder. Inevitably these end up in Chaplin's mouth but, though he pulls a face, they do not appear to cause him any great pain or difficulty. The climax of the scene is reached via alternating shots of Chaplin being hit repeatedly with the mouth-wiper and of the inventor trying to fix the machine. It is clear from the force of the movement that being hit by the mouth-wiper would hurt but it does not appear to be a very dangerous weapon. The machine finally releases Chaplin who slumps to the floor, out of shot. In terms of the narrative of the film, Chaplin's fall signifies the machine's triumph over man. Here slapstick serves a dual purpose; it provides a humorous sequence of blows but it also makes a point about the state of society at the time the film was made.

Troublesome sets: filmed performance

Unlike *Modern Times* the 1986 film *The Money Pit*, directed by Richard Benjamin and starring Tom Hanks and Shelley Long, does not present any kind of commentary on contemporary society. Indeed the *New York Times* reviewer Vincent Canby (1986) described it as 'disposable fiction'. The proposition at the opening of the film is that Walter and Anna are about to be made homeless by the return of Anna's ex-husband in whose apartment they have been living. The film is set in New York, establishing a setting in which finding accommodation is not easy or cheap. The comic frame is asserted early in the film by an incongruous visit from some of Walter's (an entertainment industry lawyer) clients. They are a drag group whose opening statement is that they have decided to change the group's name to Meryl Streep, introducing

a strong element of absurdity. Through an unscrupulous realtor who is a friend of Walter's the couple hear about a mansion just outside New York which is being sold for what appears to be well below its market value. Furthering the absurd comic frame, the owner claims that she needs to sell in a hurry because her husband has been arrested on suspicion of having been Hitler's pool boy. As Walter and Anna look around the house a sense of anticipation that things may go wrong is established in a variety of ways. The house is lit by candles, with the owner claiming she is saving on the electricity. The staircase creaks ominously and Walter is not allowed to use the upstairs bathroom. Each of these elements will subsequently be a source of pain to Walter or Anna. The couple's attitude to the property also reinforces a sense of anticipation in the audience. As they wait for a train back to New York Walter says 'we can't lose' to which Anna replies 'Nothing can be this easy.' They decide to take a risk on the house and as they decide they hear a train arriving. Walter is triumphant 'The train is coming right when we decide to buy the house. This is an omen.' The train then goes straight through the station without stopping, implying to the audience that if it is an omen, it is certainly not a good one.

Things begin to go wrong as soon as they move into the house. For example, Walter presses the doorbell and it bursts into flames. He then bangs the door hard and it falls inwards. Neither of these incidents causes much in the way of pain but they serve to establish that elements of the house are not as safe or secure as one might hope. In this way the sense of anticipation which was established by their first visit to the house is heightened. Next Walter is seen repairing the stairs. He is hammering and, predictably, hits his thumb with the hammer. He jumps on to the stair he has mended, only to have his foot crash through the next stair down. The use of repetition and reversal is established when Walter goes to fix the door. We have already seen this fall inwards when he was on the outside of the house. He fixes the door and tests it to see that it is now functioning. It appears to be fine, but to be sure he tests it a second time. This functions as repetition and also raises the expectation that something will go wrong. The viewer draws on what they have seen earlier to conclude that it is likely that the door will fall. Walter enters the house and slams the door behind him. It crashes outwards. This fulfils the expectation that something would go wrong but by falling outwards it reverses the previous conclusion, functioning as both a repetition and reversal.

The next sequence builds audience anticipation and expectation further by cutting backwards and forwards between what Anna is

experiencing and what is happening to Walter. First we see Anna investigating the dumb waiter. A raccoon leaps out of the dumb waiter and attacks her. In response to her screams Walter runs up the stairs to help her. Thus we focus first on her and then on him. As he runs up the stairs they start to disintegrate. The treads collapse and the banisters start falling out. The sequence then cuts back to Anna who is running about upstairs as the raccoon attacks her. The next shot shows Walter clinging to the stairs before we revert to Anna, screaming. This switching backwards and forwards enables the two plot elements to develop side by side, facilitating a slower development of each character's suffering. The next shot is a close-up of Walter's face, looking worried. Then, in long shot, the point of view shifts to behind Walter. From this angle we witness the final collapse of the staircase. Walter leaps for the landing as the staircase disappears from under him. He is left dangling from the landing. What follows is a long shot of him with all the wooden debris below. This reinforces the danger he is in as, in reality, a fall on to such a mound of debris would certainly result in serious injury. Anna, now escaped from the raccoon, runs out of the upstairs room in response to the sound of the stairs collapsing. Walter shouts 'the stairs are out' to prevent her from falling. She sways on the landing, trying to keep her balance. In close-up we then see her foot on his fingers. He grimaces and says 'Honey you're on my fingers.' She moves her foot and he falls. We get a shot of her from his point of view and then a shot of him from her point of view. He is lying on his back amongst the debris. The structural set up of this sequence, and the use of a musical soundtrack in counterpoint to the action throughout extends the comic frame and this is reinforced by Walter's lack of injury. As an audience we are aware that the pain we have witnessed is neither accidental nor the result of any immediate incompetence (though it would be possible to claim that it results from their foolishness in buying the house). Instead the pain is a result of the random actions of either animals, in the case of the raccoon, or objects, in the case of the staircase. The audience can judge that neither victim is particularly at fault for the suffering they experience. Nor can any other active agent be blamed. In a sense, earlier discussions of deservedness are irrelevant in responding to pain which is inflicted in this way. The viewer can empathise with the situation Walter and Anna find themselves in. The viewer may have similar (probably less drastic experiences) to draw on in understanding what this pain would be like if it were to occur in reality. Equally, in evaluating the pain the viewer is aware that the consequences are unrealistic. Anna looks messy but has not been wounded by the raccoon, whilst Walter has fallen on to a pile

of wooden debris but does not appear to have cut himself or to have broken any bones. This lack of realistic consequence confirms the comic frame and allows the viewer to laugh.

There is another extended sequence later in the film which relies even more heavily on a lack of realistic consequence to facilitate laughter in response to the pain caused by misbehaving objects. Walter is the primary victim in this two minute and five second sequence which unfolds as follows. Walter is on the first floor of the house where various workmen are undertaking different tasks. This establishes a sense of chaos and of no one individual being in control of the space. Walter is about to step on to a plank which helps to bridge a large gap in the floor when he is stopped by one of the workmen. Walter engages in conversation. The viewer sees the plank that Walter was about to step onto being removed by another workman. When he finishes his conversation, Walter turns and steps onto the space where the plank once was. He falls straight through to ground floor level, landing on a plank which acts as a lever so that his weight sends an electric saw flying into the air. As the saw flies up, a wheelbarrow balancing on another plank is also visible in shot. The sequence of shots here implies that the wheelbarrow will form some part of the action. Anticipation is, therefore, set up in the mind of the viewer. A wheelbarrow on a plank at first floor height is a potentially dangerous proposition. The saw lands on the plank. The next shot is of Anna connecting two sockets together. The saw starts working and begins to cut through the plank. The next shot is a close-up of Walter's face, showing fear. This shot and his expression increases the anticipation of the viewer in relation to the wheelbarrow and confirms that, whatever the outcome, it will not be good. In the next shot, the saw cuts through the plank and the wheelbarrow, which is revealed to be full of rubble, starts to fall. We see this shot from Walter's point of view which increases the sense of danger that the viewer is likely to feel. This is followed by a rapid interplay of shots showing Walter's face, the wheelbarrow hitting the end of the pivot and Walter's face as he goes flying up into the air. This action constitutes both a repetition and reversal. We have already seen the pivot in action but this time Walter's motion is reversed. Previously he was falling, this time he soars. As the sequence plays out, a number of shots of workmen's faces responding to what is happening to Walter are used as a means of punctuating the sequence and as a way of giving the viewer an indication of an onlooker's response. The first of these shots occurs at this point, just before we see Walter go flying through a window. After he crashes through the window Walter lands in a large tray of plaster. We are shown this through

three different shots: one from above, one from level with the top of the tray and the third as he raises his face. This final shot also reveals that the tray containing Walter is moving upwards. From the point at which Walter crashes through the window we hear operatic music whenever we focus on Walter. This serves to reinforce the increasing danger Walter is in because the music and action escalate synchronously. A shot by shot analysis of the sequence would take too long to be useful here, particularly as the sequence accelerates and takes on a cartoonish quality. It is this cartoonish quality which is important because it stresses that what takes place is outside the realms of everyday action. In this way the consequences can be other than realistic and the viewer is more likely to be able to laugh because as the sequence escalates it becomes more and more ridiculous. Walter staggers along the edge of the roof, blinded by a plaster-soaked cloth over his head. A sequence of events results in the total collapse of the wooden scaffolding, with workmen running in all directions. This catastrophic result relates to the notion aired earlier that slapstick stunts are often excessive in nature and that the exploitation of the excess is one of the ways in which the action is further removed from reality. A series of long shots show Walter falling and sliding down various parts of the scaffolding as it collapses. He eventually lands in a wheeled bin which rolls away downhill. Once again excess is emphasised because as he rolls down the hill, the workmen dash about in all direction in a crazy choreography. None of them bumps into each other and not one of them is hit by Walter who has no control over the bin. The repeated shots of Walter rolling amongst them strengthen the idea that the sequence owes more to the laws of cartoon action than real action. Alongside the action, the operatic sound track keeps pace. Walter's bin hits the side of a pool pitching him head first into it. The shot sequence reveals the pool and fountain to the viewer before Walter lands in it to allow for anticipation to be established. He lands in the pool and disappears right under the water. He sits up and the next shot shows us the collapse of the last section of scaffolding. We then return to Anna who is connecting two more plugs. This is a repetition of the beginning of the sequence and reminds us of the part she unwittingly played in starting the slapstick ball rolling. As she connects the sockets the little boy statue of the fountain begins to urinate on Walter's head. This marks the final indignity that Walter has to suffer. It is also in many ways anti-climactic. The excess of the sequence suggests that the final result would be much more violent. Much of what happens to Walter should cause him pain. The viewer watching instinctively imagines what it might feel like to be catapulted upwards

and thrown through a window or to be flung from a falling chute on to a collapsing scaffold but Walter appears to suffer no serious consequences. This lack of real consequence confirms the cartoon quality of the action and ensures that the audience can laugh freely. The filming of the sequence also means that it is impossible to see, while watching, whether Hanks does his own stunts or whether a stunt double takes the most dangerous falls. The imdb website lists a whole team of stunt men and women and gives the name Scott Wilder as Hanks's uncredited stunt double. This lack of clarity as to who is taking the risks muddies the viewer's process of embodied perception. If the viewer believes a stunt man to be involved then they assume that the stunt double is capable of doing things that they themselves could never achieve so they may be distanced from matching their own bodies to the action. The excessive nature of the stunt also encourages this distancing because the lack of reality encourages an objectification of what is happening. Interestingly in his review of the film Canby suggests that the sequence's excess might hamper the audience's response. 'It looks as if it cost a mint and took weeks to shoot. The spectacle is so impressive that you hesitate to laugh.'

Troublesome props: televised performance

A stunt that shares the excessive quality demonstrated in *The Money Pit* is that involving the motorbike in the episode of *Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em* entitled *King of the Road* (1978). In this episode Crawford undertakes a series of stunts that involve a much higher level of risk than those considered in the previous chapter. In this episode Spencer is working as a motorcycle courier. He is out making a delivery when his throttle becomes stuck. There is no indication that Spencer has done anything to cause the throttle to stick. The bike simply refuses to behave in the way that it should, providing us with an extended example of object-based pain. Spencer on a broken motorcycle, travelling at speed, can only mean one thing – trouble. The interest for the audience lies in anticipating what might ensue and then watching what actually occurs. Enjoyment is guaranteed either via superiority and satisfaction if their expectation is fulfilled or pleasure and surprise if the accident plays out in a different way. What probably comes as a surprise to the audience is how long the sequence lasts. From the moment Spencer mounts the bike to the end of the stunt sequence takes around seven minutes. The real threat of pain begins when Spencer says 'My throttle's stuck I can't stop.' The comic frame of the situation is reinforced when he

says 'My bike has bolted. It's absconded between my legs.' His language is oddly formal and infers that the bike is in some way alive. Much of the early action involves Spencer swerving around cars and mounting the pavement. These actions do not put him at any great risk either as a character or as a performer. As has been suggested earlier the audience is aware of the duality of the situation in which the character is incompetent but the performer is highly competent. Regular shots of Crawford's face remind the audience that he is carrying out his own stunt work. He was proud of his stunt work generally and felt confident in that he was trained by experts. However he has admitted that he "'wasn't too happy ... When [he] met [his] two motorcycle stunt instructors. One of them was limping, with a stick. The other had his arm in plaster. And if your trainers look like that..." (Crawford, 1978).

Despite his hesitation Crawford pulls off the various sections of the stunt. In terms of escalation, the stunt elements become progressively harder. After swerving around, Crawford rides along the scaffolding on a building site at the first and then the second floor level. He rides over a collection of punts which form a pontoon from one side of a river to the other. Next he crashes through a tent and emerges with the fabric over his head so that the following section of the stunt work is carried out with his face covered, restricting his vision. He crashes into a barn and back out of it. We then see him riding sideways on the motorcycle along a road before he returns to riding normally in order to travel up a pile of hay bales as if it were a hillside. He and the bike fly into the air and then land together in an expanse of water. The stunt does not end there despite the audience's expectation that this crash landing will have damaged Spencer, the bike or both. Crawford emerges from the water, still on the motorbike and drives on across a field. The final element of the stunt sees Crawford standing up on the seat of the motorcycle. He then crashes into an entry barrier which knocks him off the bike. He clings to the barrier which goes up. He flings himself off the barrier and crash lands into the room where the whole scene began.

There is a snowball quality to this lengthy sequence. Each time we imagine that the stunt must come to an end something else occurs. The dangerous nature of the stunt is emphasised through the choice of camera shots. As Spencer careers head first towards an oncoming car the shot is a point of view one so that the audience shares Spencer's perspective. When the bike leaps from the hay bales the shot moves to ground level, looking up at the bike, which emphasises the height of the jump. This short sequence of Spencer in the air plays in slow motion which gives us plenty of time to see Crawford's face and to anticipate where

the bike might land. The audience knows the bike must come down and wonders where it will land, but this moment is elongated because the slow-motion makes Spencer seem to float.

Choice of shots also contributes to building the sense of anticipation. At one point Spencer repeats the line that his throttle has stuck. He does not feature in the next shot which shows us a building site. The suggestion is clear. This is the next place that Spencer will be seen. He then rides onto the site as the foreman opens a door. The lunacy of what follows is highlighted by frequent shots of the various builders, open-mouthed in shock. The level of humour is also increased by the absurd nature of what happens and by the way it is filmed. When Spencer crashes into the barn, the camera pans along the outside brick wall of the barn and the audience hears but does not see what is happening. As the camera pans past doors on the ground floor, items such as chickens, buckets, hay and a piece of corrugated metal fly out. The camera then pans along the first floor windows and the implication is clear: somehow Spencer has made it to the first floor. More items are ejected from these windows. This highlights the absurdity of the situation.

An audience watching this extended sequence is encouraged to anticipate and to laugh by the choice of camera shots and by the editing, which switches the focus from Spencer to his surroundings and back. These techniques also remind the audience of the fact that the sequence is removed from reality. This is most clear at the moment that Spencer is shown entirely submerged but still moving along on the motorcycle. In reality submerging the bike like that would have cut the engine out but he rides slowly and steadily up and out of the water. Even when Spencer does things that should cause him considerable discomfort there is little or no sign that he is, in fact, affected. Those who should be hurt by his antics such as the builder who dives from the second floor scaffold are not shown in pain. The audience sees the action that they know should lead to injury and pain but they never see any consequence. It is much easier to laugh at a man diving off some scaffolding than to laugh at his bloodied or broken body after the dive. The lack of reality frees the audience to laugh. They are aware of the risks being taken but no real pain is shown. In fact, Spencer shows very little performed pain either, but the threat of pain is constant. The level of skill required to pull off the stunt also encourages an unidentified embodied response. It suggests, as does Clayton (2007), that the performer is in some way 'other'. The viewer believes that Crawford's body is in some way different to their own. They are also aware of the amount of rehearsal and planning that must have gone on before the sequence could be filmed. It is also highly

unlikely that it was filmed in one go. Different sections would have been filmed at different times and some sections would have required take after take. Crawford is on record as saying that the 50-foot motor cycle leap took 30 takes. However, the viewer is unlikely to be aware of this in the moment of watching. They are more likely to be affected by the obvious physical risks being taken by the performer. They may find this risk-taking exciting or they may be too aware of the danger to laugh. The comic frame should be strong enough in this sitcom to facilitate laughter but the action is realistic rather than cartoonish at the point of the jump and this edge of reality may discourage laughter.

Dangerous animals

Above I mentioned the moment in *The Money Pit* when Anna is attacked by a raccoon. At that point in the chapter the action involving the raccoon was considered in relation to the interplay of two sequences in the structure and development of the larger stair collapse sequence. However, the raccoon sequence is worthy of consideration in its own right, as an example of what happens when animals are incorporated into the performance of comic pain. The greater part of this chapter has concerned itself with examining how an audience responds to comic pain when the originator of the pain is inanimate and cannot be held responsible. In other words, the infliction of comic pain free from any kind of moral consideration has been explored. A similar amorality is in operation when the audience watches pain inflicted on hapless humans by animals. Often the animal in the sequence will behave in a manner that is entirely in keeping with the behaviour expected from it. In July 2012 the *New York Daily News* ran a story which detailed how a woman out running with her dogs was attacked by a number of raccoons. She was left with 'more than 100 cuts and scratches and 16 puncture wounds after the wild animals pounced on her'.

Examples of animals being used to cause comic pain are obviously far less common in live performance. To a large extent this is because of the need for the animals' handlers to be close at hand. This can be facilitated on film because the handler can be close by but just out of shot. The only way that this would be remotely possible in the theatre would be for the handler to be waiting in the wings. In theatre it is much more common for animals to be represented by puppets. For example the 2008 tour of the musical *Dr Dolittle* uses puppets and puppeteers to put animals on the stage in a more controlled manner than would be possible with live animals.

On film it is also possible to switch from live animals to stuffed or model animals from one shot to the next. This substitution is made in *The Money Pit* and it is one of the techniques that contributes to creating laughter rather than a merely shocked response. The evidently live raccoon which leaps out from the dumb waiter and attacks Anna at the beginning of this sequence is behaving in a way that is reasonable for a raccoon. If the attack were real it could result in serious injury and would not be remotely funny. An American audience watching *The Money Pit* would be likely to know what typical raccoon behaviour is whereas a European audience may not. What is important here is to consider how this attack is presented in such a way as to detach it from the potential real-life version of the attack and render it comical instead. The set up shot shows Anna winding up the dumb waiter using a rope pulley. As the dumb waiter rises a raccoon comes into shot. The minute it can be seen, it snarls and waves its paws as if it is about to pounce. It is clearly a real raccoon but it would be reasonable for the viewer to assume that it is trained rather than wild. The next shot is of Anna's reaction: she screams and jumps back. In the next shot the raccoon attacks, leaping onto Anna and appearing to bite her neck. She screams but from this point on it is clear that this is not a real raccoon. The live raccoon was grey whereas the raccoon attached to Anna's neck is much more brown in colour. It is also evidently lifeless. The shots from this point onwards are distanced to make it harder for the viewer to be certain whether the raccoon is live or not. The notion of reality has been disturbed by the obvious substitution of a fake raccoon and the comic frame is reasserted because Anna's actions follow an established comic pattern. She runs across the corridor from one room to another. She is screaming and flapping her arms whilst the raccoon dangles from her neck. She immediately runs back across the corridor in the same way. This crossing from side to side is reminiscent of comic chases seen in the films of, for example, the Crazy Gang and the Three Stooges. Her final run across the corridor is a repeat of the first except that now the raccoon has disappeared. A number of elements are at work to provoke a laughter response from the audience. First the situation is distanced from reality through the use of a fake raccoon. This is confirmed by the final shot of the sequence when Anna reappears in medium shot, without the raccoon, showing no signs of having been bitten or scratched. The performatively constructed nature of her runs also supports the idea that this is a sequence designed to provoke laughter. Her reactions are in some ways excessive. There is a cartoon quality to her screaming and hand-flapping but the audience may also be aware that this reaction

would be inadequate in the face of a real attack. As with the comic pain inflicted by objects, the question of morality is irrelevant. The raccoon is simply doing what raccoons do.

The comic potential of animals causing pain has been exploited in other recent films including *Evan Almighty* (2007) and *Furry Vengeance* (2010). Both of these films rely heavily on excess and *Furry Vengeance* uses animals to create a snowball effect through their escalating impact on the protagonist, Dan Sanders, who is played by Brendan Fraser. The basic premise of the film is that the company for which Dan works is developing a plot of land for housing in such a way that many animals will be driven out of their natural habitat. In the example drawn from *The Money Pit*, the raccoon appears to act instinctively. However, in *Furry Vengeance*, as the title suggests, the animals seem to act in a more concerted and deliberate way in an attempt to drive Dan Sanders out. The first violent incident involving the animals has another character as the victim. He is the developer who precedes Dan in his job. In order to knock his car off the road, the animals trigger an elaborate construction in which one small action leads to another until finally a large boulder is released. This sequence comes very near the beginning of the film and sets the tone for the action that will follow. It serves to introduce the audience to a world in which animals are not defenceless creatures but a dangerous group of activists who band together and communicate across species divides in order to take on their common enemy – man. The animals, therefore, are given an entirely unrealistic sense of agency. They do not simply act instinctively. Instead they plan their actions to cause maximum pain and they do so throughout the film's narrative; their escalating stunts finally leading to the breakdown of Dan Sanders. In one sequence a bird keeps Dan from sleeping, pecking repeatedly on his bedroom window. When Dan moves to another room the bird follows. Eventually Dan climbs out onto a pitched roof in an attempt to catch the bird. He slips and lands astride the pitched roof. The close-up on his face demonstrates how much pain this fall onto his crotch causes him. When he moves to try to catch the bird he slides down the side of the roof and clings briefly to the guttering. At this point the bird pecks his nose which results in him falling to the ground. We then hear the bird making a noise which sounds very much like laughter. Dan's actions in climbing onto the roof are foolish but it possible that the audience will have some empathy with him based on experiences of disturbed sleep. Given Dan's earlier encounters with the animals there is likely to be a strong sense of anticipation that the bird rather than Dan will come out on top. The three moments of pain are easy for audience

members to identify with. The first moment, the slip astride the roof, is more likely to draw an embodied empathic response from male audience members but women watching can also understand the pain involved. It is also easy to imagine the pain and discomfort involved in having your nose pecked and in falling from a height. Dan's encounters with the animals present the audience with an interesting challenge in terms of deciding where their sympathies lie. In order to laugh at the animals' repeated attacks, the audience needs to come to the conclusion that what the animals are doing is justified and that Dan deserves the pain he experiences. Other early animal attacks include a raccoon pulling out the plug while Dan is on the running machine so that Dan pitches over the front and an animal planting an acorn in Dan's cereal so that he bites down on it. Each of these examples is swift and whilst Dan is clearly caused pain by them, it is relatively easy for the audience to dismiss the pain as minimal. However, there are other examples where the audience may feel their sympathy tipping back towards Dan. One such example involves the audience watching one skunk after another climbing unnoticed into Dan's car. This sets up a clear sense of expectation and, given the number of skunks, this example returns the audience to an awareness of the role of excess. When Dan drives off the skunks clearly release their scent and he crashes into a pile of pipes near his house. The close-up shot after the crash shows the car filled with a white cloud of skunk-scent with Dan clawing at the window. This image is cartoonish in quality. The dense white cloud of skunk scent is unrealistic but is a visual way to indicate for the viewer the intensity of the smell. Whilst the effect of the stench is clearly unpleasant for him, Dan is not caused any lasting damage. The next example of pain, however, may confirm the audience's sympathies for Dan. He is chased by a large bird and dives into a bush to escape. As he hits the bush we hear him say the word 'bees' in an agonised tone. At this point, with Dan shown in relative long shot, the action is funny. It is not presented realistically and the comic frame has been firmly established by Dan's behaviour and by the fact that he is wearing an ill-fitting pink jogging outfit belonging to his wife because the animals have stolen his clothes. However, when we next see Dan it is from his wife's point of view. She arrives home to find him sitting on the stairs. His face is swollen from all the bee stings to the extent that he cannot open his eyes. The realistic depiction of his injuries may prevent a laughter response. If audience members have ever been stung by a bee they are likely to empathise with his pain and this may also prevent a laughter response. This moment may constitute a tipping point in the audience's moral

response to the action. Thus far the animals have appeared to be justified in their attacks because they are attempting to protect their homes and the incidents have not depicted Dan in anything close to real pain. The film's use of lack of reality to establish the comic frame helps to blur the moral issues still further. For example, one scene shows the animals hot-wiring Dan's car. Given the obvious impossibility of such action, it can be argued that, as is the case with cartoons, a moral judgement is rendered irrelevant. The fact that Dan is clearly losing his sanity might encourage us to sympathise with him but as his responses to the animals become more outrageous he too begins to move into the realms of the cartoon. He sets a highly elaborate trap across his lawn which includes signs for the animals to read. This further loss of distinction as to what the animals are and are not capable of points both to his lack of sanity and to the increasing irrelevance of using reality as measure for what takes place in the film. This lack of reality also applies to the way in which the animals are depicted. The animals involved in the various schemes to hurt Dan are either puppets or are real animals with special effects used to create facial expressions or to give them a manual dexterity they would not otherwise possess. Interestingly this can be seen as objectifying the animals which in turn removes them further from the real. It is not too much of a stretch to suggest that the animals become more like props (in so far as they are clearly manipulated by another source) and paradoxically more human. This difficulty in knowing the extent to which to attribute real-world motivations to the animals complicates the laughter response as a reaction to the slapstick pain which is depicted. How is it possible to reach a conclusion as to the morality of the animals' actions when it is so difficult to categorise them in relation to notions of agency and intention? Animals should not be capable of extended malicious intention but these animals clearly are. This raises the secondary question of whether their malice is justified by their desire to defend their territory.

The examples considered in this chapter raise interesting questions about the role of excess and reality (and, indeed, the connections between the two) in encouraging or even manipulating audience response. The further the audience is pushed from considering the events they witness as real, the less likely they are to respond with any kind of moral consideration. If the event is clearly impossible in reality then realistic notions of deservedness and morality fall away. This issue of morality and deservedness becomes both more relevant and more complex as we move on, in the next two chapters, to consider deliberately inflicted pain, both performed and real.

6

Intentional Pain

The notion and action of laughing at the pain of others inevitably raises moral questions, particularly when the pain is deliberately inflicted. To laugh at someone's pain in real life is likely to provoke a feeling of unease in the moment of laughing or guilt after the fact. If we see somebody slipping on ice we may laugh at the contortions of their body. We may laugh as they hit the ground, partly as a release of tension. In such a situation though most adults will also experience a counter response which relates to a self-judgement, raising the question was it right of me to have laughed at that? In everyday life, however, most adults would agree that it is wrong to laugh at the real suffering of others. If we laugh at somebody falling off a chair and then discover they are really hurt, we stop laughing. In life, just as when we watch a performance, we are making a series of rapid judgements about how significant the pain might be. The more significant the pain the less likely we are to laugh. Our response is also likely to be influenced by considerations of deservedness and justice. If the victim of pain is of higher status than the inflictor, we are more likely to laugh than in the opposite situation. In an earlier chapter we considered the sense of natural justice which is triggered when a small boy knocks the top hat off a gentleman with a snowball. If we witness a child being pelted with snowballs by an adult we are more likely to feel outrage than to be amused.

Necessarily these comments about likely responses are generalisations. There is always the possibility that somebody would laugh at the sight of adults snowballing a child, but the social norm of protecting children rather than harming them, and judging those who do harm children harshly, is a particularly strong one. Other considerations are also at work, many of which relate to the idea of status. Just as we may laugh at the adult being hit by the child we may laugh at the master being

hit by the servant and at the lone person (adult or child) defending themselves against a pair or group. Natural justice comes into play and when the individual most at risk in any given scenario hurts the aggressor(s) whose intention was to hurt them, the audience shares vicariously in their triumph and will probably laugh at the mighty or many brought low.

There are instances where these instinctive moral judgements can be reinforced or challenged by performance techniques, by the narrative structure of the performance, by film techniques and through sound effects. The preceding chapters have illustrated and analysed how pain in performance can be framed to free audiences from making moral judgements, often by presenting the pain as accidental or as having been inflicted without malice. This basic premise is then supported by the various techniques which have already been identified. This chapter deals with examples of performance in which the pain is very clearly inflicted deliberately and will also consider how this pain is received and judged by the viewer within a moral framework.

Intentional pain in live performance

Commedia dell'arte

Examples of deliberately inflicted pain are extremely common and have existed across all the forms of performance considered in this book and across a range of historical periods. One early example can be found in the *commedia dell'arte* scenario, 'The Tooth-puller'. There is significant potential for moral judgement in this scenario. In it Pantalone attacks Pedrolino who is fighting with Pantalone's son. Pantalone bites Pedrolino's arm so Pedrolino decides he will get his own back. In various plot twists and turns Pedrolino persuades a range of characters to join him in pretending that Pantalone has bad breath. Everyone tells Pantalone his breath smells. Pedrolino then pays Arlecchino to disguise himself as a tooth-puller. Pantalone orders Pedrolino to find him a dentist and the disguised Arlecchino arrives. He carries with him a selection of blacksmith's tools and sets to work on Pantalone's teeth. Causing great pain he extracts four perfectly good teeth. In considering this scenario there is both an immediate and a broader moral issue to consider. The immediate issue is provoked by Pantalone biting Pedrolino on the arm. The pain inflicted by this inspires the revenge that drives the rest of the plot. Pantalone only bites Pedrolino because Pedrolino has been fighting with his son. The moral point here is not entirely clear. Neither

Pantalone nor Pedrolino behaves well and the audience is likely to judge that they are as bad as each other.

There is an over-arching moral situation to consider though as Pantalone is the natural enemy to the *zannis* in *commedia*. In this situation the moral judgement of the audience member is likely to relate to which of the characters they most closely identify with. A working-class audience member may well see Pantalone as an oppressive and abusive master who deserves anything his servants can throw at him. On the other hand, a more middle-class audience member may be more likely to align with Pantalone and see Pedrolino as an example of the badly behaved servant classes. The moral message of the scene is not entirely clear then but the scenario is constructed and performed in such a way as to make it clear to the audience that the expected response is laughter rather than shock. In part this is done through a distancing from reality that begins with the implausibility of Pantalone actually biting Pedrolino's arm. Pedrolino's performed response to this pain can also guide the audience's laughter. Pedrolino did not wear a mask but was characterised by white make-up that made his face one of the most expressive in *commedia*. He can therefore appeal for the audience's sympathy.

As the scenario continues a number of slapstick comedy features come into play. Anticipation is built by the fact that the audience witnesses each stage of the plot. We know there is nothing wrong with Pantalone and there is an increasing tension as to whether he will actually lose any teeth. Once Arlecchino gets to work the tension transfers to how many teeth he will lose. The tension is offset by the cartoon quality of the violence. Arlecchino uses what are obviously inappropriate tools, more suited to a blacksmith than a dentist, and may well have been dressed in such a way as to indicate that he is not really a tooth-puller. Pantalone's stupidity in falling for such a flimsy disguise builds a sense of deservedness in the minds of the audience. If Pantalone cannot see that he is being tricked then perhaps he deserves to have pain inflicted upon him. All these elements combine to create what Andrews calls a 'mechanical comic fantasy' (2008, p. 68). Andrews also suggests that the tooth-pulling 'could be orchestrated by Arlecchino into a climax of comic violence. He would use his survey of the blacksmith's tools "inventing silly names" for them as a technique of delay, with Pantalone expressing suitable fear' (2008, p. 69).

The potential for comedy in Pantalone writhing in the chair and having to be restrained, screaming in fear and/or agony is huge. This could be extended by Arlecchino's obvious pleasure at Pantalone's distress. Here is where a degree of sadism is present and it is possible that

an audience might feel that Pedrolino and Arlecchino are going too far. *Commedia* troupes could certainly have added spurts of blood to enhance the violence (they used pigs' bladders full of blood for such effects). In terms of morality the key is to establish Pantalone as enough of a villain for the audience to feel that the pain and punishment are deserved. If the victim is innocent we are less likely to laugh than if the victim has been unpleasant and our sympathies have been secured by the perpetrator of the violence.

In this way slapstick comedy has the potential to be used as a means of reversing the usual status relationship and of exacting revenge where necessary – even if such a revenge may be short lived and Arlecchino's slapstick is soon used on him again.

Circus clowns

Notions of revenge are also at work in the next example of deliberately inflicted pain which is taken from Federico Fellini's film, *The Clowns* (1970), and in which the pain seems to stand outside moral consideration. During the entrée considered here there are many clowns in the ring creating an atmosphere of mayhem and confusion. However, it is the actions of two clowns in particular, functioning as a sparring double act, which are of interest. The comic frame is established by the circus and by the appearance and actions of the clowns. They are dressed in such a way as to place them clearly outside everyday norms. This is reinforced by their extravagant hair and make-up. As has been established earlier, the appearance of clowns goes some way towards their objectification. The audience knows that the performers are human and subject to pain but the presentation of the performers as clowns distances them from us and diminishes an empathetic response. Another element which reduces the likelihood of either an empathic or moral response is the clear lack of reality in the entrée. The props used by the clowns include a series of hammers, each one larger than the one before. It is clear that these are not real and when the clowns hit each other with them it is evident that no real pain is caused. Similarly when the clowns move on to firearms – including a revolver, a cannon and a bazooka – the visual appearance and size of the weapons signals that they belong in the world of performance rather than reality.

The entrée centres on the disagreement and physical altercations between two clowns, one of whom is dressed in a dinner suit of the wrong size whilst the other wears a rather odd evening gown (despite being clearly male). A third clown is trying to hammer a false nail into the circus ring and becomes the unwitting supplier of hammers to the

sparring clowns. The entrée revolves around escalation and retribution. Four hammers are used and they get bigger in size, providing an escalation in the sense of the pain that would be inflicted if they were real. The escalation is reversed at the end of the entrée because when the two sparring clowns end up sitting next to each other one picks up the smallest hammer and hits the other on the head. This constitutes a reversal of expectation and plays with the audience's likely anticipation of how the scene might end.

The audience, therefore, watches the intentional violence within a strongly established performance frame. The knowledge that the pain inflicted is not real is supported by the reactions of the clowns to their various injuries. When the clown in the suit is hit on the head a red balloon inflates at the point of impact, suggesting a huge and painful swelling while indicating to the audience that this is all make-believe and that no harm has been done. When the clown in the gown is hit, tears gush from his eyes in an entirely unrealistic way. Later in the scene, when the clowns move on to attacking each other with firearms (another form of escalation), their reactions to being hit are equally cartoon-like. When the clown in the dinner suit fires an over-sized revolver at the clown in the evening gown his only reaction is to fall down. He promptly jumps back up and produces a cannon to fire at the other clown. The clown in the dinner suit is not physically injured by the cannon shot but his clothes become tattered as an indication that he has been hit. The clear performance frame and the over-sized nature of the props ensure that the audience can laugh freely at this depiction of comic violence and comic pain. The viewer can easily reach an embodied understanding of what such pain would feel like but because the pain is so evidently unreal the empathic response becomes redundant and instead the ridiculous actions of the clowns as they attack each other simply provoke laughter. There is no need for the audience to consider a moral response to the pain. Such a response is clearly irrelevant, a notion that is underlined when the clowns hug and make up towards the end of the entrée.

Punch and Judy

The decision-making process in relation to notions of morality is more complex in the case of Punch and Judy. The performance of pain in what is perceived as essentially an entertainment for children suggests that the adult audience should be engaged in a morally inflected decision-making process in response to what they see. In part some hesitation arises because of the widely held belief that watching violence encourages

children to become violent. Researchers in psychology, Huesman and Eron monitored a group of children into adulthood and 'found that the ones who'd watched a lot of TV violence when they were eight years old were more likely to be arrested and prosecuted for criminal acts as adults' (cited in American Psychological Association, 2013). The nature of the violence is not defined but references to the numbers of fictional murders that children are likely to see before age 11 implies that this is realistic rather than comic violence. Even children as young as four respond very quickly to the conventions of a performance, learning what responses are acceptable and expected.

For his sixth birthday party my son requested a Punch and Judy show, which was a great success. The children roared with laughter as Mr Punch threw the baby down the stairs; they laughed when he hit Judy and they laughed when the crocodile bit his nose. They were clearly not engaged in any kind of moral judgement. They had been encouraged by the performer, Professor Daniel Slater, to shout out, and the first sequence of the show focused on the clown, Joey, telling them to shout out when they see Mr Punch. They learn very quickly, therefore that large and loud responses are required. One parent questioned the morality of allowing them to watch a show which involved so many people getting hit. The question of morality occurred only to the secondary audience (the parents) as they watched the primary audience (the children). Historically, however, Punch and Judy was not aimed at an audience entirely made up of children. It was performed on the streets for whoever happened to be passing and contemporary etchings show very mixed audiences.

Watching a Punch and Judy show we do not have to give a moment's consideration to whether or not the pain is real; whether the performer might actually suffer. The human performer is hidden from view and we see only the puppets representing Punch and the other characters. As a result of this the intensity and frequency of the violence is much greater in Punch and Judy than in other forms of popular performance (for example pantomime or *commedia dell'arte*). The performers inflicting violence and responding as though to pain are wooden puppets. They are, therefore, entirely objectified. This objectification of the puppets is emphasised by their caricatured nature. Both the puppets and the booth contribute to establishing the performance frame for a Punch and Judy show which, in turn, aids the audience's recognition of the show's comic purpose.

In line with my suggested model, audiences watching human performers match their own bodies' ability against that of the performer

and make a judgement about the level of pain inflicted or felt. With puppets our judgement works slightly differently. Each time an action occurs that would cause pain in real life (such as being bitten by a crocodile) the audience's sensibility of real pain is immediately undercut by the awareness that the puppet cannot possibly feel any pain.

That the violence was a popular part of the show, certainly from the nineteenth century must be beyond dispute, and contemporary illustrations, such as Bartolomeo Pinelli's 1815 engraving 'Il Casotto dei Burattini in Roma' and R. Barnes's illustration 'Punch and Judy at the Beach in Llandudno' for *The Graphic* in 1897, show large audiences. The frequency with which violence occurs throughout a Punch and Judy show also suggests that it was enthusiastically responded to by the audience. Any street performance has to attract and hold its audience to make its money. One text, compiled by Robert Brough (Woodensconce, 1854), contains multiple beatings, six deaths (the baby, Judy, the beadle, the doctor, the foreigner and the hangman), and Punch being bitten on the nose by Toby the dog. Most of the violence is meted out by Punch but he is also on the receiving end of beatings from Judy and the doctor so the roles of aggressor and victim are constantly fluctuating. This variety of victims and aggressors increases the level of humour because no puppet becomes entrenched in any one role. As a result making a moral judgement about which characters may be in the right or wrong is not straightforward.

The nature of a Punch and Judy show means that the violence lacks the graphic blood and gore of contemporary horror films. Nonetheless, it represents a shocking catalogue of infanticide, murder, hanging and multiple beatings that would be horrific if depicted on human bodies rather than on puppets. When puppets are involved instead of flesh and blood we are freer to laugh at the clearly artificial pain. Speaight suggests that 'There is no reason for the combats that mark his encounters with the rest of them – except that they repeat a bit of business that made people laugh' asserting that 'the beatings and killings are only a convention with no relation to reality' (1970, p. 79) and it seems obvious on one level that the violence is included because the audience enjoy it. The lack of reality of the violence that is implied by the framing and the puppets is highlighted still further, I would argue, by two particular performance conventions in Punch and Judy. These are repetition and percussive sound effects. Usually in performance the effect of these will be cumulative and connected but for simplicity they will be considered separately here.

By its very nature repetition encourages anticipation so these two elements of the performance will be considered together. The most

obvious incidence of repetition is itself repeated in each section of the Punch and Judy script. For example, near the beginning Punch beats the crying baby three times (according to Brough (Woodensconce, 1854); John Payne Collier, 2006 (first published in 1828); and performances watched) before throwing him off the stage. This repetition of 1, 2, 3 and away occurs elsewhere. When the foreigner or interesting alien enters, Punch aims and misses once, aims and misses again, then aims and hits him, knocking him out. He is then slung onto the mounting pile of Punch's victims. This emphasis of a rhythm (beaten out clearly by wood on wood) builds a sense of expectation in the audience and diminishes any instinct to judge what Mr Punch is doing. The expectation can then be played with. For example in some scripts Judy is killed at the first blow, in others she is hit three times. In the Woodensconce 1854 version of the text the doctor is hit 21 times because he claims his fee is 21 shillings.

The rhythmic repetition of wood knocking against wood increases the audience's anticipation. How many times will the baby be hit? What will the climax be? The ultimate comic shock of the baby being thrown away centres on inversion as it is the last thing we should expect – but we come to expect the unexpected from Mr Punch. This rough treatment of a baby should draw a critical judgement from the audience and certainly would do so if it were a real baby. However, the wooden nature of the baby, which has been emphasised each time the baby falls over when learning to walk releases the audience from moral considerations. We do not have to pay attention to how we would feel if the baby were real because the baby is so evidently not real. Notions of morality are much less significant when the crimes are being perpetrated against puppets rather than humans, even though the puppets, for the most part, represent humanity.

Speaight suggests that Punch's violence may have had a social purpose and at least a socially beneficial effect: 'The man who laughs at Punch beating Judy is all the less likely to beat his own wife' (1970, p. 93). Such an argument suggests that it is possible to view the violence in Punch and Judy as serving a moral purpose. If we follow Speaight's argument then the audience does engage in a moral judgement. Viewers assess Mr Punch's behaviour as unacceptable and, from it, learn how not to behave. Given the distancing effect of one puppet beating another it seems unconvincing that laughter at such a performance might have any impact on behaviour in the real world – tempting as it is to see the Punch Professors as early combatants against domestic violence.

Leach reads Punch and Judy against a socio-political context so he sees Punch's tricking of Ketch, the hangman, as the 'people's revenge' (1985, p. 54). By extension the wife, hangman and devil can be seen as the three prongs of potential social control: family, the state and religion and Punch sees off all three. In doing so he can be interpreted as an agent for anarchy. This reading, of course, suggests that there is more to Punch's violence than simply making the audience laugh and might engage the audience in more than a simple moral judgement regarding Punch's behaviour.

'Perhaps the spectacle of his fierce assaults releases from our inner consciousness aggressive, primitive, hidden repressions; and the devils issue out of our lips in gales of laughter' (Speaight, 1970, p. 93). Tempting as Speaight's view is I do not believe that Punch's violence teaches its audience any lessons about morality or behaviour. For one thing Punch nearly always escapes scot free. Nor at any point are we, as audience, encouraged to feel any real empathy for Punch's victims. Our dominant connection is with him. To the extent that we feel any empathy at all it is probably for Punch himself, but when he is bitten on the nose by the crocodile the audience roars with laughter. Punch gets a taste of his own medicine. We see the aggressor as victim, if only momentarily, but he survives the crocodile to attack anybody else who crosses his path. In order for the audience to make a moral judgement they would have to have been encouraged to side with Punch's victims and to judge Punch, but that is not the case. Punch is more present than any of the other puppet characters and he engages directly with the audience, encouraging them to see him as a likeable rascal. The audience, therefore, is not likely to find Mr Punch's behaviour immoral. The distance from reality, the lack of real pain and the strong comic frame all encourage the audience to laugh at Mr Punch's antics without considering any serious moral implications. The audience may also experience a vicarious pleasure in witnessing all of Punch's wrong-doings and seeing him get away with everything.

Theatre

The Methuen 2006 edition of *Loot* makes clear the connection between Joe Orton's play and its popular comedy antecedents by featuring an image of Mr Punch on its front cover, and it is to *Loot* that I turn for my final example – in relation to live performance – of how comic violence and pain might be used to raise questions of morality in the minds of those watching. The notion of morality can be explored once the purpose of the violence has been determined. In Orton's *Loot* there are two principle forms of violence, that which is seen and that

which is described, which are used to create a sense of dark humour and which also suggest to the audience how they might judge the characters involved. The most obvious example of violence in the play is when Truscott, the policeman in disguise as a water inspector, beats up Hal, the young man. The darkly comic frame and the play's distance from reality has already been established through the verbal content of the play, for example, when Truscott subjects Faye to a police interrogation through which he is able to tell a ridiculous amount about her past. The audience has also witnessed Hal and Dennis manhandling the corpse of Hal's mother (Mrs McLeavy) into a wardrobe. These events establish a distance from reality and consequence which helps the audience to view the beating of Hal as unreal. Unusually, and unlike earlier examples in this chapter, and indeed examples earlier in the book, the violence does appear to have consequences. As Charney recognises, 'the physical cruelty denies one of the major premises of traditional farce: that the blows do not hurt and that the characters are, by convention, insulated from pain and punishment' (1981, p. 520). Hal's nose is bleeding by the end of the beating and, according to the stage directions, he screams in pain. The notion of comedy is reinforced by the irony in the lines spoken around the physical beating. Hal keeps claiming that the money Truscott is looking for is in church. Truscott does not believe this but the audience know it to be true having witnessed Hal and Dennis cramming the money into the coffin. There is also an irony in the lines that refer directly to the violence.

TRUSCOTT (*shouting, knocking HAL to the floor*).

Under any other political system I'd have you on the floor in tears!

HAL (*crying*). You've got me on the floor crying.

(Orton, 1983, p. 235)

Once again the audience is aware of layers of meaning. The direct reference is to what is taking place in front of them and the secondary level is Orton's indirect comment about the British police force and the British political system. The theatrical frame ensures that the audience knows that the pain is not real; the particular frame of the play suggests that the audience might be amused by Truscott's treatment of Hal, but the purpose of Orton's writing is satirical. By presenting Truscott's treatment of Hal in the way he does, Orton encourages the audience to make connections between Truscott's behaviour and real police brutality. The moral judgement, therefore, is layered. Firstly the audience may make

a moral judgement about the action in the play. Hal is not a likeable character. Given what the audience already knows of him it may not sympathise with him. Secondly, the question of merit arises because while the audience may believe Hal deserves the beating he receives Truscott can hardly be interpreted as an agent for good. He misrepresents himself, claiming to be from the water authority rather than acknowledging he is a detective, and he is clearly a tool through which Orton can criticise the contemporary police force. Beyond the action in front of them, or indeed through the action in front of them, the audience is also encouraged to make a moral judgement about the society in which they live and the role played by the police force in it.

Truscott's beating of Hal is interrupted by the reappearance of McLeavy who is heavily bandaged. The audience then learns of an event that has taken place offstage, in which a lorry has crashed into the hearse. This event could not readily be shown onstage as the crash has an extravagance to it which would be more at home on the cinema screen. McLeavy tells Truscott that the driver of the hearse has been killed and that Dennis risked his life to save the coffin from wreckage. McLeavy believes Dennis did this out of respect for his wife but the audience understands that he is trying to save the money. The ridiculous nature of what has happened is highlighted when McLeavy explains why he is bandaged 'My wounds stem from a fear-crazed Afghan hound that was being exercised at the time' (1983, p. 238). Logically he should have been injured in the crash, instead Orton makes his injuries more random and therefore potentially comical. The extravagance of the event is emphasised when the charred and smoking coffin is brought on to the stage. The arrival of the coffin opens the way for some traditional farce action which reminds the audience of the comic potential of the scenes they are witnessing. The stage directions indicate that as the coffin is put down '*the side falls away, revealing the banknotes inside. DENNIS stands in front of the coffin, shielding the contents from TRUSCOTT and MCLEAVY*' (239). This mixing of the serious and the comical ensures that the audience cannot take anything that occurs too seriously as even the more serious scenes are coloured by the farcical action which occurs in the rest of the play. The next example, drawn from film, also uses farcical action as a way of indicating the moral judgements an audience should make.

Intentional pain on film

Home Alone (1990), in which a small boy outwits two burglars, provides a rich example for analysis in relation to planned pain where the

script-writer and director give a clear indication of the moral stance they expect the viewer to take and where that moral stance relates directly to the issue of status. The audience's enjoyment of the pain is encouraged by the clear moral frame which is established as a justification for all of Kevin's actions. There are so many interlinked elements in the way this film has been scripted and filmed that it is difficult to select a starting point but making such a selection is necessary in the interests of analysis. To begin, it is important to consider the ways in which the young boy, Kevin, is framed as vulnerable victim and as a worthy recipient of the viewer's empathy and support. Initially the film constructs Kevin as an outsider even within his own family. He is called a variety of names and is sent to bed early to sleep alone in the attic. This facilitates his being left behind in the morning and establishes him in the eyes of the audience as deserving sympathy, because he had not done very much wrong and his relations all ignore him or are unpleasant towards him. Throughout the opening scenes a number of comments are made about how incompetent he is which serve to reinforce his youth and vulnerability. This is very important in establishing swiftly that Kevin is at risk. When it becomes clear that his house is to be targeted by a pair of burglars known as the 'Wet Bandits' this notion is strengthened. At this point in the film the moral frame is very clear. Kevin, a young boy, needs to defend his home against two male adults who are intent on breaking in. Kevin is outnumbered and he is morally in the right: as one trailer puts it 'Yesterday he was just a kid: today he's a home security system' (*Home Alone* trailer, 1990). This is the establishing background to the extended sequence in which we see Kevin set about planning how to defend his home. 'This is my house I have to defend it' he proclaims in a close-up shot which shows him with his back against the front door. The planning sequence in the film invites the viewer to be on Kevin's side. First we see the paper plan of his defence which is stereotypically child-like in its graphics and handwriting. It is on screen just long enough for the viewer to focus on some (but not all) of the words that indicate what Kevin has planned. The sequence of Kevin setting up his defences involves nine elements. These are placing toy cars and planes under the hall rug; watering the front steps so that they will ice over; hanging a red hot hook on the door handle; watering the back steps so that they will freeze over; tarring the basement steps and positioning a nail on one step; tying rope to the tree house; putting glue on cling-film and piling feathers in front of a fan; putting glass Christmas ornaments under an open window and, finally, tying strings to large paint cans. Already repetition is in use as two lots of steps are watered

to freeze over. These establishing shots provide the viewer with the opportunity to anticipate how the tricks will play out. Some are easier to anticipate than others. How the tarred steps and nail or the iced steps will be used both as a defence and to inflict pain is clear. However, the rope to the tree house opens up possibilities without making clear how it will be used. Anticipation is therefore being used in two ways. Firstly the viewer has the potential pleasure of anticipating what will happen and being proved right. Secondly a more open-ended sense of anticipation is established where the pleasure lies in finding out how the object will be used. Two of the set-ups also include shots of the tarantula which escaped from the bedroom of Kevin's older brother earlier in the film. By the time the Wet Bandits try to break into the house there is no doubt that the audience sides with Kevin. This ensures that when the burglars try to attack and are painfully repelled the viewer laughs, at least in part, because their pain is deserved. Kevin's ingenuity in setting a variety of traps adds to the viewer's pleasure, as does our notion of anticipation because we know much of what awaits the burglars.

The sequence of painful attempts to break into the house relies on a number of techniques and strategies. The pain in each instance is intentionally inflicted but the establishment of the moral frame discussed above ensures that we do not judge Kevin for inflicting the pain, rather we share in his triumph as each element of his plans works. The nature of the pain is excessive and is disconnected from reality, both elements which increase the likelihood of a laughter response. Because we have two alternating victims, a rapid rhythm of pain shots is established and the viewer is barely given time to recover from one laughter response before the next provocation occurs. The film is extreme in terms of both excess and disconnection from reality: there is no way in which the burglars would be able to withstand the physical punishment they absorb if it were real. A detailed analysis of this sequence reveals how choice of shots, sound effects and the use of repetition and variation enhance the likelihood of the audience responding with laughter at the pain and violence presented for its entertainment.

A sense of irony is established as the Wet Bandits discuss how they are going to get into the house. The shorter, marginally brighter robber, who is called Harry Lyme, says 'Maybe he'll let us in, you never know' and Marv Merchant, the taller more stupid half of the double act, responds 'yes, he's a kid. Kids are stupid.' Given the elaborate nature of Kevin's defence plans, the audience already knows that he is far brighter than the adult burglars. The sequence of the burglars trying to get into the house to the moment when they are defeated and we hear the

sound of the police siren lasts sixteen minutes so it is not possible to offer a shot by shot analysis of what happens. Instead consideration will be given to the over-arching narrative and to the use of repetition, and a number of moments from the sequence will be analysed more closely to demonstrate how use is made of excess, unreality, camera shots and sound effects to build the success of the sequence.

Kevin's dominance is established from the outset. The Wet Bandits knock at the back door asking to be let in. The shot here allows the viewers to see the burglars and to see the gun that Kevin pokes out through the cat-flap. The shot switches, presenting the viewer with a low point-of-view shot so that we are looking up at the burglars who are unaware of the threat from below. Kevin fires and Harry Lyme is hit in the groin area. The performative nature of his reaction encourages the viewer to laugh. He jumps up and down making strangled sounds of pain and talks in gobbledegook (or the grummelot of *commedia*) through gritted teeth. Marv walks back to the house. There is a cut to an interior shot showing Kevin lying on the floor with the gun trained on the cat-flap. In the next shot Marv pushes his head through the flap. He is in close-up and his eyes widen, indicating his awareness of the danger he is in. The next shot is of Kevin who smiles and says hello before firing the gun. We cut to a shot of Marv as he is hit between the eyes. He falls back, crying out in pain and there is an interior shot of Kevin celebrating. The Wet Bandits are then shown still outside and Harry says 'He's armed. I'm going round the front. You go down the basement.' The viewer is aware of the traps that await them in both directions. This opening sequence makes use of repetition and variation to provoke laughter and in doing so reinforces the stupidity of the burglars. First Harry is shot and then Marv. On this level there is repetition but there is also variation because, at the point he was shot, Harry was unaware of the presence of a gun whereas by the time Marv puts his head into the cat-flap he should realise the danger. The fact that they are shot in different parts of the body also allows for different responses to create different elements of visual humour for the audience. The camera focuses much more on the burglars than on Kevin who is shown only twice. This imbalance of focus continues throughout the whole attack/defence sequence and in some ways allows the audience to dissociate Kevin from the pain that is being inflicted until we see the infectious childish joy with which he celebrates his triumphs.

Once the Wet Bandits separate the film alternates its focus, following first one and then the other, to emphasise the similarity and synchronicity of what is happening to them. Harry and Marv both fall on the now

icy steps. First, we see Harry fall at the front steps. His fall is excessively performative. He flies up in the air, falls backwards and lands on his back. A shot from above shows him flat on his back, groaning. The next shot pans up a flight of steps and as the shot reaches the top we realise that these are the back steps with Marv about to descend. There is a moment of anticipation here for the audience. We have just seen Harry fall and it is inevitable that Marv must do the same. Note the variation in the repetition. Harry must go up whilst Marv must go down. Marv slips on the first step and falls. A shot from above showing the consequence of his fall echoes the one of Harry earlier. This links the burglars, reminding the audience that they are having very similar experiences. We are given a similar view of each of them brought low by the ingenuity of a small boy. Anticipation builds from this point onwards because we have seen the number of booby traps set by Kevin and the steps are only a starting point which must be negotiated and overcome by the burglars before they can actually get into the house. In neither case is the consequence of the fall realistic. Marv, for example, falls down a flight of seven or eight icy stone steps. Whilst he groans in response to his fall, he has broken nothing and does not appear to have cut or scraped any skin. Even when his metal crowbar falls and hits him on the head (with accompanying exaggerated sound effect) he is not knocked out. This lack of consequence has already been identified as being integral to encouraging a laughter response to the depiction of pain and it is repeated throughout the trials that the burglars undergo.

When Marv gets inside, one of Kevin's traps results in a red hot iron hurtling down a shaft to hit Marv full in the face. Marv is knocked over and the next shot shows the imprint of the iron's plate on his face. In reality such a blow would probably have knocked him out or at the very least broken his nose. The cartoon-like quality of the neat iron shape on his face frees the viewer's laughter because there is no indication that he is feeling the level of pain that would normally be associated with such a burn. Harry burns his hand by grasping the door handle which has been heated by the red hot hook and whilst it clearly hurts him the comic frame is reinforced by the sound effects which support his actions. He plunges his burning hand into the snow and we hear a distinct sizzling sound. If his hand were really hot enough to make snow sizzle he would probably have blacked out from pain. As it is, the sound effect highlights the excessive nature of the pain and reinforces our awareness that this pain is not real because Harry's reaction to it is inadequate. Later he is burnt again when he trips another booby trap trying to enter the house. The trap lights a blowtorch and Harry's hat catches

fire. Just before entering he says 'You're dead, kid.' This line reminds the viewer of Kevin's potential vulnerability and the evil intentions of the burglars. In this way we are prompted to consider the morality of the situation just before we witness something which, in reality, would cause unbearable pain and lasting damage. One shot shows the blowtorch flame blasting across the top of Harry's head. The next shot shows his head as he starts to scream. The shot zooms in on his face and head. He continues to scream. Then we switch to an exterior shot and we watch Harry back away from the house with his head on fire. He plunges his head into the snow and the sizzling sound effect from earlier is repeated. This constitutes a visual and aural repetition of his reaction to having his hand burnt. As there was no real consequence to that injury the audience is being primed to accept that there will be no real consequence this time either. A close-up as he lifts his head reveals that the top of his hat and most of his hair has been burnt off. Once again, in reality the pain of such a burn would be unbearable but rather than seeing a prolonged response at this point we switch to Marv, which disrupts the narrative relating to Harry's injury. When we return to Harry, who has witnessed Marv falling, all Harry does is to touch his scalp gingerly. Each time he touches his skin the sizzling sound is repeated and he says 'ow'. Once again the cartoon nature of the responses to pain is emphasised.

The insistence on a lack of real consequence to the pain is important both in triggering the viewer's laughter and in reinforcing the moral judgement which is presented in this extended sequence. If the injuries inflicted upon the Wet Bandits appear to have serious consequences; if the viewer stops to consider in any detail the pain that is likely to result from having the top of one's head burnt by a blowtorch then he or she will not laugh. The comic grimaces, exaggerated facial expressions and the use of sound effects combine to reinforce the idea that the pain is not real. As long as the viewer is laughing at the burglars' pain then the moral message that Kevin is justified in the means he employs to defend his house is strengthened. If the viewer stops laughing then perhaps they might stop to consider the viciousness of some of the booby-traps in a way that would make them question the central moral message that Kevin is in the right and the burglars are in the wrong.

The choices made in filming this sequence ensure that events move so rapidly that the viewer is swept along by the snowball effect of one trap after another being successful. For each trap, the choice of shots reminds the viewer of the nature of the trap and then shows the impact of the trap on the victim. That Kevin is barely shown until the burglars

actually get into the house is significant. His absence in some ways removes him from the viewer's mind as the architect of all these traps. When he is shown briefly celebrating it provides a contrast to the burglars' pain. However, once the Wet Bandits get inside the house Kevin features in more shots which serves to highlight the difference between the adult burglars and this small blond boy. Also by breaking into his home the burglars are actively and legally very much in the wrong. As the moral situation clarifies and as Kevin is potentially more at risk, the viewer needs to be reminded of his childish qualities in contrast to the burglars. The viewer by this stage is firmly on Kevin's side.

The viewer is also likely to be entertained by the burglars' stupidity. Despite already having suffered at Kevin's hands they continue to walk into a series of traps. Once inside the house the Wet Bandits come together as one unit. Until this point the splitting of the double act has effectively given the viewer alternating points of focus as first one robber then the other is shown suffering. As a unit they should perhaps constitute more of a threat. As they now appear in shots together the viewer is reminded of their combined intention to get their own back on Kevin. There is also humour in the way they respond to the effects Kevin's traps have had on each other. Whereas up to this point patterning and repetition have occurred by cutting from one to the other, their coming together in the hall of the house situates them both in the same shot, having the same experience. Together they slip on the cars. They face in opposite directions but their falls are so similar as to constitute a mirroring of each other. Their journey up the stairs presents them as layers of the same being. As Kevin lets the first paint can fly Harry, who is heading up the stair in front of Marv, realises what is happening and ducks. The paint can smacks into Marv's face, knocking him back down the stairs. Harry looks back to see what had happened to him and as he looks forward he is hit by the second can. By unifying the double act in this way they become a single entity. As a result it is now possible to view the two burglars not as a double act but to view them as one half of a double act, with Kevin as the other. This double act of the burglars versus Kevin is interesting in a number of ways. Physically the expected contrasts are there: they are larger than Kevin and they are considerably older than him – elements that might position them as the half of the double act with more status. However, Kevin is clearly cleverer than them and more agile. So, despite his size and his youth which would render him the lower half of the double act in life, he assumes the role of the brighter half in this clearly oppositional double act in the fictional world of the film.

It is clear by this stage in the film that the burglars are not going to beat Kevin so for the audience the entertainment lies in seeing exactly how Kevin will finish them off. Once inside the house the two burglars are lured through another series of traps until they reach the attic. By the time Harry and Marv reach the attic, Kevin has escaped across the rope which we saw him set up earlier. He taunts them from the safety of the tree house and they venture across the rope to try to get him. When they are half-way across Kevin lifts a large pair of shears to the rope; he calls to his pursuers to get their attention, further building the tension. When they have realised the danger they are in he cuts the rope and, in a long shot, we watch them swing on the rope before they crash into a wall.

Kevin escapes into the basement of a neighbour's house but the Wet Bandits have seen where he has gone and are waiting for him at the top of the stairs. For the first time in this extended sequence they appear to be in charge of the situation. Harry lifts Kevin up and hangs him from a coat hook. Kevin looks down at them but he no longer has the upper hand. He listens as Harry reels off a list of threats, ending with the threat to bite Kevin's fingers off. Close-ups of Kevin's face show his fear, and the morality that has been so clear throughout appears to be at risk. Perhaps the bad guys will win after all. However, Kevin is rescued by his elderly neighbour, Marley, known to children in the neighbourhood as the 'South Bend Shovel Slayer'. In a final fitting irony he uses his metal snow shovel to knock out first Harry, then Marv. He lifts Kevin down and carries him (emphasising Kevin's age and size) out of the house to safety.

The narrative structure of this film, therefore, constructs a very clear moral message for the audience, positioning them alongside Kevin and against his tormentors so that, despite the horrific nature of some of Kevin's defensive strategies, we are free to laugh wholeheartedly because the burglars are in the wrong and Kevin is just a child defending his home. At the end the viewer does not want Harry and Marv to triumph. We watch in horror as it appears that Kevin has lost. The moral message has been so clear throughout the film that it seems impossible that the Wet Bandits will triumph and, of course, Marley ensures that they do not.

The range of examples considered in this chapter demonstrates how complex the question of morality is in relation to the performance of pain and violence within a comic frame. Events occur that we would not laugh at in everyday life – a small boy defending his home against burglars, domestic violence and a crash involving a hearse – but if the comic frame is secure enough such events can be tinged with humour,

making decisions about morality much harder to make. It has become clear that a number of factors govern the moral judgements we make about pain and violence when they are presented for our entertainment. One key factor is the issue of merit. To what extent is the pain deserved? When, as is the case in *Home Alone*, the victims are clearly in the wrong from the outset then laughing at their misfortune becomes much easier because it is possible to see the pain as a punishment for wrongdoing. In other clearly performative frames such as Punch and Judy or the black comedies of Orton the judgements we make about the morality of the pain and violence witnessed rely more heavily upon the nature of the performative events. Thus Mr Punch can be extremely violent without necessarily being judged because he is a wooden puppet dishing out pain to other puppets. In Orton's work the moral decisions are made more complex by Orton's layering of the performed and the real. This layering of reality versus performance also comes in to play in the hidden camera and reality clip shows considered in the next chapter. In these examples the agency of the person being hurt is an important feature influencing our response. When the pain is sought by the performer, even when the pain is real, we may well laugh because we are freed to do by the performer's choice. Where the pain is real and accidental then the issue of merit which featured in *Home Alone* reasserts itself. This is why it is much easier to laugh at adults doing stupid things than children doing unwitting things. Even as we respond in the moment to the performances that we see, a complex range of inter-linked decisions are being made very rapidly about merit, agency and vulnerability.

Not all entertainment programmes that feature comic pain and violence present their material with such a strong indication to the audience of where their sympathies should lie. Reality television shows, both hidden camera series and home video clip series present their audiences with more of a dilemma.

7

Real Pain

This chapter considers a range of examples in which real pain is given a performance frame either in the way that the instances of pain are filmed or in the way they are presented after the event. The ways in which they are presented create a comic frame through which they can be judged as examples of slapstick. Techniques used to do this, which will be explored more fully in this chapter, include commentary, onscreen audience, camera techniques and physical reactions to pain such as tripping falling, grimacing and screaming. Many of the examples are either self-inflicted or accidental which, judging from examples considered in earlier chapters, would seem to diminish or negate a consideration of morality. What I seek to do here is to explore how the nature of and responsibility for making moral judgements implicates the audience as part of the exchange of real pain for entertainment. To what extent does the audience's willingness to be entertained by incidents of real pain demand a moral judgement be passed on the audience as much as on those within the performance frame?

Intentional real pain

Reality television shows that rely on hidden cameras to capture on film practical jokes which may involve pain for the victim have existed since at least 1948 when *Candid Camera* aired for the first time in the US. The British version began its onscreen life in 1960. *Candid Camera* has existed through various incarnations in both countries and has been followed by other shows of the same nature such as *Beadle's About* (UK, 1987–96), *Totally Hidden Video* (US, 1989–92), *Trigger Happy TV* (UK, 2000–03), *Scare Tactics* (US, 2003–present) and *Punk'd* (US, 2012–present). In the television show *Jackass* (screened on MTV between 2000 and

2002) and the films (*Jackass: The Movie*, 2002; *Jackass No 2*, 2006; and *Jackass 3D*, 2010) which followed it no moral framework is established for the audience and, whereas the pain in *Home Alone* was clearly performed pain and therefore without real consequence, the stunts performed by Johnny Knoxville, Bam Margera and Steve-O were dangerous and viewers frequently saw the performers injure themselves. Morally this is a much more complex situation than the fictional performances considered hitherto. The pain is real but it is in some cases actively sought and, if not sought, is certainly anticipated in the construction and performance of the stunts. The performance frame now indicated by the name *Jackass* means that viewers are aware that they may witness real pain. For some viewers this may add an element of excitement. In order not to horrify and alienate the audience, there are, however, a number of ways in which the nature of the programmes and films encourage a laughter response. For a start, we know that all of the stunts will have been risk assessed and planned because major TV stations and film studios are aware of the potential negative impact of serious injury or even death. The very fact that we are watching the episode or film indicates that the stunts went pretty much as expected. The opening sequence of the first *Jackass* episode on MTV indicates what is to follow and sets the tone of the show. The opening shots show a series of home movie style mishaps with no shot lasting for more than 2 or 3 seconds. At the end of the sequence the following disclaimer appears: 'The following show features stunts performed by professionals and/or total idiots. In either case, MTV insists that neither you or any of your dumb little buddies attempt the dangerous crap in this show.'

The language used indicates the flippant intentions of the show. The performers are either professionals and/or idiots. The stunts are diminished by the term 'dangerous crap'. The audience is diminished too by the phrase 'dumb little buddies'. We are, therefore, primed for something that may be dangerous but that is not *serious*. This is crucial in helping to establish the desired response. The nature of the home channel is important too. According to Brian Englis, 'MTV targets audiences between the ages of twelve and thirty-four, with a median age of twenty-three; an age group which has proven highly elusive for other media. According to MTV's own research, 54% of its audience is in the 12 to 24 age group' (Englis, 1991 p. 111). There is, therefore, a likely match between the performers and their audience. This is important in relation to body matching. The audience can either gain pleasure from watching the performers try to pull off stunts that they would never put themselves through because they can imagine all too clearly

the possible consequences or they can gain pleasure from planning to emulate the stunts.

Our response is also governed by the reactions of the performers and the other members of the production team. In some stunts we can hear the performers' comments. For example, in episode 1 of series 1, Bam Margera cycles down a hill into the back of a portable toilet cubicle. The viewer hears the crash as he hits the cubicle and then his comment 'that one hurt'. The frivolous nature of the stunt is reinforced by a man exiting from the cubicle. Many of the *Jackass* stunts involve what might be defined as puerile humour, as do the sketches with which they are interleaved. Such sketches include Knoxville entering a variety of establishments wearing a strap-on erection beneath his shorts. Thus dangerous stunts are mixed with sketches and tricks that rely on base forms of humour. These inevitably affect viewers' responses to the dangerous stunts, making it harder to take them seriously and easier to view them in the same light-hearted vein as the sketches which precede and follow them. Thus in the first episode the sequence of stunts and sketches is as follows:

Sketch or stunt	Content	Duration
Sketch 1	Strap-on erection	2 min 8 sec
Stunt 1	Cycling into toilet cubicle	8 secs
Sketch 2	American footballer grabs fast food from restaurant window and runs off with it	28 secs
Stunt 2	Steve-O lifts a full glass using only his mouth and drinks the contents	28 secs
Stunt 3	Johnny Knoxville tests self-defence items	2 mins 36 sec
Stunt 4	Kneeling skateboarder pulled along by rope attached to car	6 secs
Sketch 3	One performer drives a car with another performer concealed in the boot. He escapes, shocking passers-by	2 mins 10 secs

Focusing on the contrasting moral implications of stunt 3 and sketch 3 will be helpful in establishing the range of moral dilemmas the viewer faces when watching *Jackass*. In stunt 3 Johnny Knoxville sets out to test the impact of a range of self-defence weapons by trying them out on himself. Knoxville introduces the stunt by saying that he will be doing a little work with self-defence equipment. This comes early in the first episode of the first series and it is therefore unlikely that the viewer will have any particular expectations. However, the stunts and

sketches which precede this have been sufficiently quirky to make Knoxville's next comment – 'I'm going to start off by spraying myself with red pepper spray' – seem almost normal. This sense of normality is reinforced by the fact that the stunt is filmed in what appears to be Knoxville's backyard and that he is wearing only trousers and a T-shirt. All of this works to establish in the viewer's mind that what they are about to see is entirely normal and reasonable. This illusion is fractured as Knoxville lists the other items he will be testing: a 120,000 volt stun-gun and a 30-second shot from a 50,000 volt taser. The listing and showing of these items to the camera builds anticipation as to whether he will actually do these things and what the impact will be. The stunt is not given any context. There is no claim that Knoxville is trying to make any point about the rights and wrongs of using these devices. It appears that he simply wants to be filmed experiencing them. He sets up the first test with the words 'hit me' in a mock-heroic voice. When the spray hits his eyes he appears to lose control of his movements in response to the pain. He waves his arms around his head, staggers slightly, makes to crouch down, and then tries to stand before falling to one knee. This physical response does not look so very different to the performed responses to slapstick pain observed in the examples considered in earlier chapters. Only once he is on the ground does Knoxville begin to comment. Throughout this sequence the man who sprayed Knoxville has been visible in shot. He and Knoxville form a kind of slapstick double act in which they are merging the notions of sparing and supporting. He also forms an onscreen audience, modelling a response from which the television audience can take its cue. His only comment as Knoxville falls to his knees is 'Oh my God' but his tone is jokey rather than shocked and there is no indication to the audience that they should feel anything other than entertained. As a towel is brought Knoxville's comment is 'I feel like my eyes have gonorrhoea.' As Knoxville continues to wince and react the crew shout advice as to how he might ease the irritation, such as by jumping into a swimming pool, but there is no indication of concern. He is asked 'would that stop an assailant?' and he responds 'That would stop a fucking freight train.' Despite his evident discomfort the tone of the filming and commentary is resolutely light-hearted.

The second test is of the stun-gun. It opens with the tester holding the gun close to the camera so that the viewer can see and hear the buzzing as the volts flow. Knoxville, who is waving an American flag, shouts 'charge' and runs towards the man holding the stun-gun. He is hit in the stomach by the stun-gun. He collapses backwards on the floor

DEMO

and barely moves. The tester is disconcertingly quiet as if he is not sure what to make of Knoxville's state. Knoxville groans a couple of times and then sits up to examine whether the gun has left any marks on his skin. Once Knoxville is moving and talking the two men begin to joke. Knoxville is asked 'You wanna try that one again?' and then 'Weren't you on 91210?' The ability of both men to joke appears to diminish as the pain inflicted gets greater. It is as if the increased reality of risk and real harm displaces the comic frame.

The third test is of the taser and, as if in reaction to the quieter ending of the previous test, this one opens with Knoxville shouting and groaning before he has even been hit. This time he is bare-chested with the stars and stripes draped around his shoulders. He crumples to the floor when hit but continues to groan and shout noisily. As he is tased again and again he reacts as if he is being tickled. He body jerks and arches convulsively. He giggles and shouts 'No, no wait.' The person tasing him joins in the laughter. The comic frame reasserts itself through their behaviour in response to what is apparently less severe pain than that caused by the stun-gun. The stunt ends with Knoxville discussing which was the most painful (the pepper spray) and another member of the crew asking if he wants to go and watch it on the TV. The relationship between pain and laughter is complex and compromised here. Despite Knoxville and the team's attempts to keep the filming light-hearted, it is clear to the viewer that what they are witnessing is real pain. However, if not directly self-inflicted the pain is, at least, accepted by the victim who willingly places himself in that role. He could choose not to do this. This agency on his part could be seen as giving permission to the viewers to laugh (without any feelings of guilt or self-judgement) if they feel so inclined. The viewers are also aware that the *Jackass* team is making money from their exploits – another element which might absolve the viewer from any moral responsibility. If not designed to provoke outright laughter this stunt is certainly presented for our entertainment. The team's intention is that the viewer will get some pleasure out of seeing Knoxville in pain. It could also be argued that without an audience the channel would not fund or air the show so the relationship between the viewer, the *Jackass* team and the morality of presenting real pain as entertainment is not a clear or easy one.

The notion of humans getting pleasure from seeing others in pain, dying, at risk of pain or at risk of death has a long and varied history. The Romans enjoyed seeing the Christians being attacked by the lions. Generation after generation around the world has watched public executions. Spaniards enjoy watching bullfights. Perhaps the *Jackass*

offerings, with the added humour which can be derived from their comments, can be seen as a more frivolous and less dangerous version of such gruesome pastimes. It also true, as is so often the case with entertainment, that we can choose not to watch. If the questionable morality underpinning the show makes us uncomfortable we have only to change channels.

However, the next sketch in this same episode took place on a range of public highways and involved bystanders who apparently had no knowledge of what was going on and were drawn in simply as a result of where they happened to be. The level of acquiescence or active engagement is hard to judge from the footage that is shown as part of the show. In this sketch Knoxville is driving a car and pulls over repeatedly to ask for directions to a hardware store. As the passerby stops to offer advice screaming and thumping can be heard from the boot. The boot then flies open and a man, Chris Pontius, leaps out. He is gagged and his hands are handcuffed. He wears only a thong. The members of the public who witness this are clearly shocked by it. The implication is that Chris Pontius is the victim of a kidnapping or has been engaged in some kind of bondage scenario. Whilst no direct pain is shown the threat of pain and the implication of past pain are present throughout. However, the audience is not encouraged to engage with the morality or otherwise of this situation. It is presented as a hidden camera show and the audience is encouraged to laugh both at the performers and the reactions of the public witnesses. In the final example of the sequence, at the moment Pontius leaps from the boot a woman runs away in horror and the camera shows a young teenage girl looking horrified. This unwitting public involvement makes an important difference to the morality of the sketch. In the stunt Knoxville is a willing participant, paid to take risks and fully aware of what is about to happen. He is entirely in control. In the latter sketch whilst the performers know that what they are doing is a fiction the nature of the hidden camera trick ensures that the public believe that what they see is real (*Jackass*, season 1, episode 1).

Another sketch later in the same episode presents a similar moral dilemma. In this sketch the actor straps a doll into the baby seat on the back of a cycle. Passers-by are clearly intended to assume that the doll is a real baby. We are then shown a number of sequences where he crashes the bike so that the bike slides along the floor with the 'baby' strapped into the seat. This is a complex example because there are two audiences, one knowing and one un-knowing and there are two sets of responses. There is also a duality in the knowing audience's response.

This audience can laugh at the baby apparently being involved in a bad accident because they know it is only a doll. This audience is also likely to respond to the reaction of the onscreen audience, those passers-by who believe they have witnessed an actual (rather than planned) accident involving a real baby (rather than a doll). Depending on the attitude of the knowing audience they may laugh at what they realise are the unnecessary responses of the passers-by who rush forward to help. However, those who empathise with the passers-by are less likely to find the responses amusing because, in empathising, they realise how shocking witnessing such an accident might be. The moral question here is whether it is appropriate to play this kind of hoax on passers-by who take what they see as being real.

Accidental real pain

The issue of reality in relation to how and whether we laugh is central to the television shows that rely on audiences sending in home videos of accidents. These programmes, such as *You've Been Framed* (UK, 1990–present), *Australia's Funniest Home Videos* (1990–present) and *America's Funniest Videos* (1989–present), show clips sent in by viewers which show friends or family of the sender hurting or embarrassing themselves in some way. By submitting these videos, the sender turns a record of a real incident into a performance requiring a response from its audience. That these kinds of shows occur across at least three continents indicates a widespread appeal for this kind of entertainment. Each of these shows follows a similar format. A celebrity host introduces the clips which are grouped thematically so that a number of similar sketches are shown together. In this way we might watch four or five clips of people falling into swimming pools followed by a similar number of clips of people falling off skateboards. A comic or light-hearted frame is established by the style and content of the commentary and by the accompanying music. Whilst the viewer knows that the pain is real, that these are accidents which actually happened, the fact that they are being shown indicates that those involved were unlikely to have been seriously hurt. Still a number of questions arise concerning the morality of these shows. First the show pays money for the videos sent in which creates an exchange where money can be raised by those prepared to make themselves or those close to them look foolish. Occasionally a clip is shown which looks suspiciously as though it has been set up. This affects the audience's response, moving it closer to that which we might have when watching shows like *Jackass* because there is reason to doubt

the reality of the action. The appeal of such shows to the networks is clear. They are very cheap to make. Most of the filming has already been done by the amateurs at home so all that has to be funded is the filming of the presenter providing the commentary. Costs can also be reduced by replaying clips both within the episode and over a number of episodes across the years. On Saturday 3 November 2012, 2.6 million people watched ITV's *All New You've Been Framed!* (*Guardian*, 2012). This constituted 11.6 per cent of viewers. As a point of comparison *Strictly Come Dancing* aired at the same time and attracted an audience of 9.6 million (43.5 per cent of the viewers). An audience of 2–3 million is perfectly acceptable in relation to the running costs of the show. On Sunday 19 May 2013 the season finale of *America's Funniest Videos* drew an audience of 6.82 million viewers. For comparison, in the same time-slot CBS's *Sixty Minutes* attracted 10.19 million viewers and NBC's *The Voice* drew 2.37 million. There are clearly enough people viewing who enjoy laughing at others' pain or humiliation (ZAP2it, 2013).

Episode 1 of season 18 of *America's Funniest Videos* (aired on 7 October 2007) includes a sequence which lasts 1 minute 15 seconds and which focuses on men doing stupid things, most of which result in pain. The sequence is introduced with a reference to Kipling's poem *If* and the presenter ends by saying 'there's a whole bunch of rhyming stuff about what it takes to become a well-balanced man. Clearly these guys haven't read it' (*America's Funniest Videos*, 2007). This indicates to the audience the attitude that they are expected to take towards the individuals featured in the clips. Any moral concern about whether it is right to laugh at the pain of others is minimised by the implication that these men are not well-balanced. They are not, perhaps, our equals. The sequence comprises 18 short clips and in each clip one or more men is doing something stupid. Recognition of this stupidity, therefore, must be a factor in how the audience responds. In the opening clip three men wearing silly wigs are singing and doing a simple dance routine on the decking outside a house. One of them jumps towards the camera and his foot crashes through the decking. The viewer realises that there is real pain involved but the pain may not seem too significant. The man involved has not done anything to deserve the pain but the silliness of his behaviour in the run up to his injury makes it easy for us to treat the accident as part of the silliness. Other clips include a man being hit by a sash window falling on his head; somebody standing on the edge of a footstool which tips over so that he crashes to the floor; two men sledging off a roof and crashing into the fence below and a man running at a fence intending to jump it but crashing into it. The common element in

all these clips is the stupidity of the action focused on. In each of these situations any sensible person might anticipate a painful outcome. They are also evidently planned performances by the participants. As a result viewers may feel inclined to laugh because they feel that these individuals have consciously put themselves into a situation where they were likely to get hurt. This enables the viewer to feel less guilty for laughing at the pain because the pain is, to some extent, deserved. The pain is not a punishment but it is a likely consequence of the activity undertaken. The over-arching moral question though is whether the audience should laugh at individuals who are clearly not that intelligent and for whom pain is a route to a moment on television. We should, perhaps, feel sympathy rather than indulging in mockery.

The laughter response is assisted by the clarity of the comic frame. This particular show was in its eighteenth season at the point that these clips were shown. The audience, therefore, is well aware of the nature of the clips. The commentary offered by the presenter invites the audience to feel superior in relation to those shown. As suggested earlier the fact that those featured benefit financially from sending in their videos helps us to feel that laughter is acceptable. It is also the case in each of these clips that the injuries sustained do not appear to be significant in that the victims are able to get up and walk away. The order of the clips is also constructed in such a way as to encourage laughter as every fourth or fifth clip does not show any injury at all. For example, the ninth clip in the sequence simply shows a man dancing very badly. The brevity of the clips also contributes to encouraging laughter without reflection because there is very little focus on the pain suffered and no lasting consequences are shown. In this way the audience is presented with the next clip before they have even finished laughing at the first. This, in turn, is supported by the presence of the studio audience who are shown laughing and smiling in response to the clips. Their laughter track guides the response of the television audience. These clips of adults doing stupid things present a less ambiguous moral situation than those clips that focus on small children having accidents.

In the case of adults we may assume that they either sent in the clips themselves (thus potentially benefiting financially) or that they were at least consulted. With children it is less likely that they have had any say in the clip being shown. There are also moments in such clips when the audience is left wondering why the adult is still filming rather than going to help their child. The child victim and the lack of help from nearby adults make the moral situation much more complex. Whereas the clips of adults show them behaving stupidly, which encouraged

us to laugh, in clips showing children the incidents tend to focus on children doing things without realising the potential danger. Episode 5 of the *All New You've Been Framed!* (aired 11 June 2012) includes a sequence which is introduced as 'kids with toys'. Not all of the clips involve children experiencing pain. In order to get the audience laughing, the first two clips show a young boy using the excuse 'it's very breakable' to avoid sharing his toys with his mother and the other shows a baby's surprised reaction to a jack-in-the-box. The third clip shows a boy using a yo-yo and is introduced with the commentary 'of course originally the yo-yo was used as a weapon by the aboriginal peoples'. The clip shows the boy trying to use his yo-yo. The yo-yo swings up into the air and comes down, hitting him on top of the head. The sound of the yo-yo hitting his head is clearly audible. He turns to the camera, rubbing his head and saying 'ow'. At this point, the presenter, Harry Hill offers the further comment 'still can be'. The sequence is humorous because it is framed as such. Also, whilst the pain is real, it does not seem that the child is badly hurt. The next clip increases the level of pain suffered and also introduces the possibility of adult responsibility for the child's pain. The clip shows a little girl on a three-wheel scooter. She manoeuvres it safely. We then see an adult push her to get her going but the push is too hard and she cannot steer the scooter properly (as Hill's commentary points out). She runs into another toy, pitches forward and crashes onto the floor. She immediately begins to cry. The adult who pushed her rushes forward, picks her up to comfort her and apologises. The other adult continues to film. As television viewers we can hear the sound of the studio audience laughing but the laughter is not entirely convincing. The morality of the situation inhibits laughter. However unintentional, the child was hurt as a result of the actions of an adult and this places the clip into difficult moral territory. The commentary and the positioning of the clip in the sequence seek to establish the incident as humorous and the little girl's fall as something that can be laughed at. However, the role of the adult in causing the accident may well make the viewer feel that it is wrong to laugh, particularly as the girl cries.

When we engage with shows such as *America's Funniest Videos* and *You've Been Framed!* we can respond with laughter if the comic frame is established strongly enough and if we feel that the pain is in some way deserved and that any injury incurred is minor. As soon as children are involved the inclusion of pain limits laughter. Audiences laugh much more loudly and freely in response to clips showing children falling asleep in their food or picking their noses than they do in response to

clips involving pain. Arguably this is because children are vulnerable and societal norms demand that the appropriate response to pain in a child is comfort rather than laughter.

Accidental real pain as a result of performed pain

Examples which further complicate the audience's response and their potential consideration of the morality of the situation surrounding the performance of pain can be found when stunts go wrong. In these instances the distinction between performed pain and real pain becomes blurred. Audiences are caught in a liminoid realm unsure as to whether what they are seeing is real or fictionalised. There is an extensive history of stunts which have gone wrong. In these cases the original intention of the performance, whether filmed or live, is that the pain is performed rather than actual. In each of the examples to be considered here something occurred which shifted the pain from performed to actual whilst the performance or filming was taking place. These are perhaps some of the most complex illustrations to be considered here because a multi-layered approach is possible and audience members with different levels of knowledge about the performance may respond in a variety of ways according to whether they believe or know the pain to be real or performed. When audience members know that the pain is real rather than fictional I would argue that they are morally implicated to a greater extent if they laugh. Indeed this takes us right back to the issues raised in the introduction about when it may be right to laugh at another's misfortune. In earlier chapters notions of justice and deservedness have been used to provide a moral justification for laughing at the pain of another. The territory considered by raising these examples is much more complex because there is no obvious moral decision to be made in relation to whether the performer deserves the pain. Instead the viewer who laughs at what is real pain is required to consider the morality of their own judgements.

Concrete examples will help us to chart these difficult waters. The question of whether it is right (and moral) for audiences to allow or encourage performers to hurt themselves for the audience's entertainment has been an issue for hundreds of years. The clown Grimaldi ended his career barely able to stand. Both Findlater (1976) and Stott (2009) detail the accidents and injuries that Grimaldi suffered during his career. For example in 1817 he suffered the same accident on two successive nights in two different cities – Manchester and Liverpool. Stott describes the accident in some detail: 'He was required to emerge

from the centre of an enormous bowl of gooseberry fool placed over a rising trap, but the ropes snapped as he made his ascent and sent him crashing into the cellar with nothing to break his fall. Bruised but with nothing broken he managed to play on' (2009, p. 243).

The same thing occurred the following night leading Stott to suggest that the stage carpenters may have had a malicious hand in it. The audience may not have been aware on this occasion that anything untoward had happened, and as Grimaldi managed to continue there would have been no need for them to question their right to be entertained by Grimaldi's antics. However, this incident is part of a much broader picture. Over the years Grimaldi was injured on numerous occasions. He shot himself in the foot when making a series of quick changes. On another occasion, momentarily distracted from the performance, he was 'flattened by a falling table and badly injured. The table was carrying 16 men, suspended from the teeth of the Sicilian strong man, Concetto Coco' (2009, p. 84). This establishes a context in which many members of the audience must have known that Grimaldi suffered regular injuries. Nor was he alone in his sufferings. Delpini (another clown performer) was injured when a musket accidentally went off and hit him in the eye. Performers in this era took very real risks when participating in pantomime. Perhaps this chance of seeing such an accident was part of the thrill of going to the pantomime but the seemingly routine nature of the response to serious injuries does raise questions of morality. One could question whether the theatre managers were at fault for not ensuring the safety of their performers. It is equally possible to suggest that Grimaldi himself was responsible in his desire to perform challenging feats. He was, however, so financially insecure that he stopped performing only when physically unable to continue. Here then lies a broader cultural question about modes of performance that expect performers to risk life and limb in the hope of entertaining a paying audience. To some extent in recent years such accidents and injuries have been minimised by the requirements of health and safety. However, it is still possible to chart a number of injuries throughout the years.

By the time Buster Keaton was a child performer there would appear to have been some concern on the part of responsible adults to ensure that Keaton's physical stunts were not harming him. In one of the interviews in Sweeney's edited book *Buster Keaton: Interviews* Keaton relates how 'in New York, I had to be carried before the Governor and stripped in order to prove I had no broken bones'. Sweeney attributes Keaton's lack of breaks or bruises to the fact that 'he had been thoroughly taught

to take his falls' (2007, p. 5). Elsewhere in the book Keaton is reported as saying that he never concerned himself in advance with what business he would do in front of the camera. He knew that within two minutes of being on set he would have something. There seems to have been an assumption from Keaton himself and from those who worked with him that nothing should be prepared too carefully. In *Sherlock Jr* this attitude and the assumption that Keaton could take his falls caused problems, though the severity of these was not fully realised at the time. Keaton has been following a man so closely that a harmless but amusing routine has evolved around Keaton keeping in step with him and avoiding bumping into him. At the railway line the man realises he is being followed and Keaton is shut in one of the goods wagons. He emerges from the roof of the wagon as the train starts to move. The risk level of the stunt increases from this point onwards. When the train picks up speed Keaton walks along the carriage tops and uses the downpipe from the water tower to help him jump from one truck to the next. As he comes to the end of the train he dangles on the downpipe. He pulls the water release chain in his efforts to hold on and he is deluged with water and falls onto the tracks below. The flow of water is so intense that for a few moments it is actually impossible to see Keaton. During the time that he cannot be seen through the water 'Buster hit the railroad tracks, his neck cracked across one of the metal rails. He finished the take.... years later Buster's doctor asked him – as part of a routine but thorough physical – when he had broken his neck' (McPherson, 2011, n.p.). In this instance even the performer did not realise the extent to which he had been injured. The contemporary audience could not be expected to take this into account when watching the film. In considering this clip I think it is important that it is impossible to see the moment in which Keaton is hurt. Even knowing that he had just fractured a bone in his neck, it is impossible to see any trace of this in the moments after the accident. Perception of pain was put forward much earlier in this book as part of the instinctive process the audience goes through in making judgements about performed pain. In this case even though one may know that Keaton was in intense pain at this point, it is impossible to perceive it when watching. He gives no indication of any pain in his performance. Viewers cannot be expected to feel responsible for what they cannot perceive. The gush of water is so excessive that the most likely response at this point is to be one of surprised delight. Watching people get soaked is one of the staples of slapstick comedy. This example also demonstrates that Keaton can and did behave in the way McPherson suggests 'Keep filming no matter what! Buster will dust

himself off, drain the water from his ears...you don't get a dry run on a dangerous stunt – accidents are too likely' (2011, n.p.).

This notion of keeping filming no matter what has been adopted by other directors and other cameramen in more recent times. When Michael Crawford and other cast and crew members were involved in a potentially fatal accident while filming an episode of *Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em*, John Hobbs, the director, recalls telling the 'cameraman to keep the film rolling so that we would have footage for the news, if necessary!' (Webber, 2002, p. 63). This incident occurred when Crawford and stuntman Derek Ware were in a cage cleaning windows for the episode entitled 'The Employment Agency'. Frank is afraid of heights and at the beginning of the sequence he panics and ends up sitting on the edge of the cage. Crawford was attached by a safety wire to a visual effects man who was concealed in the bottom of the cradle. This scene needs to be analysed as it is presented for consumption by the sitcom viewer and in the light of what is known about the reality of the filming process. As a piece of fictional risk the short sequence (it lasts around 1 minute and 20 seconds) is structured through the use of long shots and close-ups to reveal the risk and to reinforce the reactions of Frank. It begins with a long shot down the side of the building to the cage below, showing how far it is from the ground. This establishes the risk involved for the characters (and for the actors, as we will consider later). The camera then zooms in on the cage to see and hear an experienced window cleaner telling Frank how important it is not to touch the buttons. In the context of the series and the audience's knowledge of Frank, this sets up anticipation because it is likely that Frank will press the buttons at some point. The next shot is from just below, showing the cage against the building. The camera then zooms out to a long shot which reinforces how far off the ground they are. These alternating shots serve to show the audience enough of the characters for the audience to understand that Frank is afraid of heights and panicking and also to emphasise the height at which the scene is taking place. This pattern of shots and foreknowledge of Frank's character ensure that the audience expectation of something going wrong is increasing. In his panic Frank sits on the edge of the cage and, inevitably, starts to slide backwards. A bucket is caught on his foot and, as Frank flails around, it hits the window cleaner under the chin. The studio audience give a burst of laughter at this. This is likely to be a relief laugh. The audience may believe that this minor incident of pain is where the scene has been leading. The camera follows the bucket as it falls and we see it smash into the windscreen of

a van below. When the camera zooms back up to the cage it becomes clear that both the window cleaner and Frank are now dangling below the cage with Frank clinging to the window cleaner's legs. The window cleaner can be clearly heard saying 'You idiot! I told you not to press the button.' This fulfils the expectation established earlier when he warned Frank not to touch them. Despite the establishing shots demonstrating the height at which this stunt is taking place the television audience may have been able to reassure themselves that the stunt would have been carefully planned and rehearsed and that the performers were almost certainly wired. This frees the laughter response. The comic frame of the programme has been firmly established as was Crawford's reputation for pulling off dangerous stunts. The stunt is resolved when a fire crew winch Frank to safety on a wire. As a fictional scene this sequence relies mostly on the threat of pain and even the threat of death. Only the relatively brief shot of Frank and the window cleaner dangling looks as if any pain may be involved and the audience would believe this to be performed pain. Frank cries out 'my windpipe' but there is no further indication of pain. The audience would be aware of the discomfort of the scene and would be unlikely to reach a state of embodied empathy. It is likely that Crawford's body would be judged as 'other', more capable and more practised than the bodies of those watching.

However, the reality of the scene was quite different. Whilst the scene had been planned and rehearsed, it had never been rehearsed on that building. Chris Fox, one of the assistant floor managers, described the scene as 'one of those which couldn't be rehearsed, you just had to go for it' (Webber, 2002, p. 65). This sounds remarkably similar to the approach taken by those working with Buster Keaton. In this instance though, the stunt went wrong. As the cage started to descend after the stunt had been finished it caught on the side of the building and started to tilt. At this point the cage jammed and would not move up or down. Derek Ware, the stuntman who was playing the window cleaner recalled the situation he was in thus, 'my arm was across my windpipe and I was throttling myself' (Webber, 2002, p. 65). In his autobiography *Parcel Arrived Safely: Tied With String*, Crawford explains that they had never practised the fall that resulted in Crawford dangling below Ware at height. When they did it, their combined weight caused the cage to tip and jam and so they 'hung, helpless, on the outside of the cradle – two hundred feet above London's North Circular'. He goes on to say that he was 'terrified that the slightest movement would send [them] plunging to [their] deaths' (Crawford, 2000, p. 213). What is presented

as a fictional risk became a very real risk. Indeed it took so long to winch them to safety that newspaper reporters had arrived by the time the cage was winched to the top of the building. The fact that the story made the press suggests that when viewers watched the episode when it aired in March 1973 they may have been aware of the accident which had occurred. Watching the sequence it is hard to tell whether the section in which Crawford and Ware are dangling below the cage was filmed before they realised the cage had jammed or shortly after. Given that they appear to be sticking to the lines of the script perhaps the material used was all filmed while they believed themselves to be safe. Ware's lines, however, are articulated in a choked manner and it is impossible to discern whether this was because his arm was closing his windpipe – as he recalled later – or whether it is acted. Watching the section and knowing that both men could have died does affect the laughter response. When the viewer assesses the potential pain and risk they judge it to be real rather than performed. In this case laughter is a much less likely response; laughing at the possible death of a well-liked actor and his colleague is not morally sound. The performers have taken the risk for our entertainment and we are implicated in any harm which befalls them. In the documentary *To Be Perfectly Frank* (1977) Michael Mills, the show's producer/director, claims 'we wouldn't do things unless they were very carefully prepared, very carefully thought out and all the possible precautions against risk been taken' (Phillips, 2012). Nonetheless it is clear that risks remain and the knowledge of this impacts on the viewer's response to the action. This incident appears to have been the result of an unforeseen technical fault but there are occasions when the risk or injury can be attributed to unwitting errors on the part of crew members.

This was the case in 1961 when Charlie Drake was injured during a live transmission of *The Charlie Drake Show*. The scene involved Drake putting his arm through an open book case to be pulled through by another performer. He was then to fall to the floor as if knocked out. The other performer then had to pick him up and throw him through a sugar glass window. The scene was to end with Drake reappearing through the door to say his catchphrase 'Hello my darlings!' Prior to the filming of this show, Drake was well established as a comic performer. His show had been running for 12 episodes before the one in which the accident occurred so his audience had had time to become acquainted with his style and to have expectations as to the kind of performance Drake would give. Before that he had been appearing on television since 1957 in shows which would have been described as comic in nature.

Thus the comic nature of the show was well established and comic violence and Drake's seeming imperviousness to pain are central to the way the action develops in the run up to the accident. Drake's fellow performer hits him over the head with a large china plate and uses a siphon to spray water into his trousers. These are staples of slapstick. Drake and the other performer clearly form a double act. Drake was very short and his partner in this scene is very tall. Drake is dressed in shapeless clothes and wears a hat. His partner is in evening dress. Throughout the scene Drake is the victim of his partner's violent actions. Drake is the protagonist and the audience's sympathies are likely to lie with him. The stunts leading up to the accident present violence and pain in a clearly comic way. When Drake is hit over the head with the plate he does not appear to be hurt. He merely shakes his head to rid himself of the stray pieces. It would be evident to the audience (both in the studio and those watching live at home) that the plate was a breakaway piece designed to shatter without causing pain. In this context the audience has been prepared to expect that all the pain inflicted on Drake is performed. His partner leads him to the book case and pushes his hand through one of the open shelves. He then goes round to the other side of the bookcase to pull Drake through. The audience, is, therefore primed to expect that the bookcase will be a breakaway piece just as the plate was. Indeed it should have been. Drake had given clear instructions for the shelves to be glued rather than nailed in place so that they would break apart more easily. According to Drake, speaking on *The Story of Slapstick* (2009), once the bookcase was set everybody went for lunch. The carpenters changed shift and a new carpenter, thinking the bookcase looked shoddy, nailed the shelves into place. Drake and his fellow performers did not realise this. Drake is pulled through and lands as expected on the floor.

Unfortunately he did not only appear to be unconscious, he actually was unconscious. It is clear that the studio audience are unaware that anything is wrong. There is laughter as he crashes through the bookcase and as he is thrown through the window. His fellow performer struggled to get him through the window because had Drake been conscious he would have been able to bear some of his own weight. More damage was done when he was thrown through the window. Unable to control his fall, he hit his head on a stage-weight at the rear of the set. He did not regain consciousness to make his entrance and the director was forced to end the show early. Drake was taken to the London Clinic and he remained there for some weeks. This example very clearly demonstrates the role that perception of pain and injury plays in our laughter

response. The studio audience laugh throughout, unaware of the nature of the injury. Watching the clip, knowing the truth of what happened, it is impossible to laugh once Drake has crashed through the bookcase. As his partner struggles with his lifeless form what may have appeared funny becomes rather chilling. Although the intention was to show the audience performed pain (and that is how the live audience received it) what the later viewer sees is actual pain. It is also relevant that the level of injury is serious. Had Drake been pulled through, bumped his head and got straight up, it is likely that both original and modern day audiences would laugh. Once the viewer knows that as a result of this stunt Drake spent two months in hospital and took two years to return to work, the laughter dies. This is, of course, connected to notions of morality. Drake was a likeable performer who had done nothing to deserve what happened to him. He had taken every precaution to ensure that he could perform the stunt safely. When he was injured, therefore, the audience had no sense that the injury was in any way deserved and was likely to feel guilty about laughing once they knew the injury was real rather than performed.

The next two examples to be considered provide instances of when the actor's actions lead directly to his own injuries but in very different ways.

When filming *The Yes Man* (2008), Jim Carrey was injured performing a stunt that required him to bump into another actor and fall onto his back. This does not appear to be especially dangerous, particularly in comparison to other stunts Carrey performs in this film, such as bungee jumping. However Carrey broke three ribs during the fall. He explains what happened thus, 'I've done pratfalls my whole life but halfway through the pratfall, I decided "I'm going to change things up here – I want to get all my limbs up into the frame and I hit so hard". But the first thing I thought of was "must look cool, man". I got up and I was in agony. I went up to the video monitors and I said "Can I see that back?"' (Metro, 2008). Again there is an echo of Keaton's working practices. Carrey picks himself up despite the intense pain and is more concerned with how the shot looks. Incidents like this demonstrate that however carefully rehearsed and planned stunts might be, a moment's indecision or distraction can be very dangerous for the performer. The accident was well publicised at the time of filming and when the film was released. This raises the interesting notion that the audience may watch the relevant section of the film to see if they can spot Carrey's reaction to the pain. The fact that the accident occurred as a result of Carrey's thought process and the fact that he accepts responsibility for it puts

the audience in a position similar to when they watch performed pain. They know that the pain is real but the performer's willingness to take risks implies that it is all right to laugh at his pain. These blurred lines of morality and responsibility make the audience's response to actual pain interesting to consider. The pain is accidental rather than the deliberate infliction of pain discussed in relation to *Jackass* above. What is difficult to establish is whether the viewer feels more free to laugh when the pain is deliberately self-inflicted or accidentally. In either case the laughter is likely to be an ouch laugh. We recognise the pain and understand how it might feel. The audience would be able to empathise because, in the case of Carrey's fall, many members of the audience will have fallen at some point and will, therefore, have memories to draw on in helping them match his body to their own. His body does not appear to be doing anything that requires a high level of skill (though paradoxically exercising a greater level of skill would have helped him to avoid or lessen the pain). The pain here is clearly self-inflicted and it is accidental. Carrey intended to avoid pain by executing the pratfall safely but his mid-leap change of plan created enough hesitation for the pratfall to go wrong.

Real pain deliberately experienced within a performance frame

Unlike the examples drawn from *Jackass* where it was apparent to the audience that the performers intended to inflict pain on themselves the final example of this chapter (and indeed of the book) provides us with a performer who deliberately experiences excruciating real pain in character within a fictional film. Steve Carrell who plays the title role of Andy in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (2005) opted to experience real pain for the sake of the cameras when he chose to have his chest waxed onscreen for real. The comic frame of this scene has been firmly established by a combination of elements. Alongside Carrell, the film stars Paul Rudd and Seth Rogan. All three have a reputation as comedy actors. The title of the film suggests that the content is likely to be comic and events up to this point in the narrative have confirmed that expectation. The scene is set up in such a way as to provide an onscreen audience who can guide and influence the real audience's responses. As the first wax strip is used the camera focuses in close-up on Carrell to ensure that the audience gets the full force of his reaction. Next is a wide shot showing the beauty therapist and Andy's friends. All three friends are smiling. This could serve to reassure the audience that although

the process looks painful it cannot be that bad. On the other hand, the positioning of the waxed strip full of hair, in shot, encourages an empathic response. It must have been painful to have that much hair removed in one go and at this point those members of the audience who believe the waxing to be real may begin to evaluate the pain involved. However, an interesting divergence may also occur in that others in the audience may believe that the scene is performed and that the hair removal is not real. Camera angles and editing mediate against this but it remains possible that because of the filmic fictional frame some audience members will continue to believe that what they are seeing is performed pain rather than real pain. Their evaluation and response will therefore be based on the belief that Carrell is not actually suffering any pain. Other viewers may be aware that this scene was shot for real. Carrell is actually having his chest waxed. Around the time that the film was made and released Carrell gave a number of interviews which detailed the process by which the waxing scene was made (JoBlo, 2005; Murray, 2013). Those viewers who are aware that the pain is real are placed in an interesting position. Carrell scripted the scene, so he was clearly in control of the sequence and made the choice to experience real pain to ensure the authenticity of the scene. The moral question remains: knowing the pain is real, should we laugh? His control of the situation goes some way to validating laughter as an appropriate response. The structure of the waxing as a piece of performance also tends this way. Repetition, inversion and escalation are all used as techniques. He is waxed at least nine times. Most strips are placed horizontally across his body but one is placed vertically. This strip is also pulled off when the therapist counts to two rather than to three as has happened for the previous strips. Escalation occurs when a strip is placed directly over his nipple. The anticipation of both the onscreen and off-screen audience is that this will be particularly painful. Both the onscreen friends who have managed to remain in the room say 'not the nipple'. The close-up of the nipple shot also reveals spots of blood on Carrell's chest from the earlier strips. Each close-up on his face shows how excruciating the pain is as does the profanity of his language each time a strip is removed but when he finally gives in and can take no more the comic frame is firmly reasserted. He says 'You know what guys? This is not a good look for me.' The shot of his torso shows us that the waxed patches form a face (two eyes, a nose and a mouth) and his friend David says 'you look like a man o' lantern'. The indication from script and performance is clearly that we are supposed to find this scene funny however painful it may have been. There is a dubious morality in openly laughing at another

person's real pain. It is true also that the level of Carrell's control over the situation should mitigate any doubts we may have.

Real pain, therefore, which is offered as part of a carefully constructed performance either within a reality format (as in the case of *Jackass*) or within a fictional context (as in the case of *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*) may well make the audience laugh but it may also raise questions about the extent to which we should be laughing. The same questions surround accidentally inflicted pain which is presented as performance within the frame of the television reality show. The issue of agency is crucial. If those suffering pain have actively sought the pain then, to a large extent, the issue of deservedness and justice is rendered irrelevant. It does not matter whether they deserve the pain or not; they have chosen it and have chosen to present it to us. If in that presentation they have created a strong enough comic frame to indicate that laughter is a desired response then the laughing audience is simply fulfilling their side of the laughter/pain exchange. Agency can also play a part in the audience's response to clips showing accidental pain. Those clips involving adults suffering pain as a consequence of their own stupidity can be met with a judgement-free laugh. *Schadenfreude* is operation here. We enjoy the pain of another because they appear to have been stupid enough to deserve it. The clips involving children are much more likely to draw an ambivalent response from the viewers according to whether the child appears to have been put at risk or exploited by those adults who should be responsible for it. Therefore the examples considered in this chapter, which are the most morally complex in this study, are the ones most likely to draw a mixed range of responses from an audience.

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Conclusion

As the preceding chapters have shown, Slapstick has a long established performance history across a range of periods and locations. This multiplicity of ways in which we may encounter slapstick suggests that it becomes embedded in our psyches from an early age. As children, we laugh instinctively at Tom and Jerry, an animated example of nature red in tooth and claw which has no moral context but whose premise is a battle for survival. Such a broad range of slapstick is performed on children's television – from the Chuckle Brothers to a whole range of animation – that we become accustomed whilst very young to laughing at trips, falls and hits of all kinds. Once this pattern of behaviour has been learnt or at the very least rehearsed we are likely to continue to laugh at slapstick as we grow older. Unlike many of the simple things that make us laugh as children and that are left behind as we reach adulthood, slapstick retains its appeal and is a form of entertainment that is equally accessible to all ages. As adults, watching slapstick may remind us of our childhood so that the adult reception of slapstick is tinged with nostalgia; in watching it we laugh in the moment but also remember the laughter of our younger selves. That our response to slapstick begins so young might encourage us to believe that slapstick is a simple form both in performance and reception. Its widespread popularity might also encourage us to think in this way. However, such assumptions about the simplicity of slapstick have surely been challenged by the preceding chapters.

As this study has revealed slapstick is remarkably ubiquitous and is not culturally or historically specific. Whilst the focus here has been on traditions of slapstick in the Western world, it does not mean that they do not exist in other cultures. Japan, in particular, has a great love of slapstick and of the performance of pain (whether within a comic or

competitive frame). Jonah Salz (2008) highlights the points of connection between the traditional Japanese form of *kyogen* and Western slapstick. The article focuses on an example of *kyogen* called *Tied to a Pole* – a title that could just as easily belong to *commedia dell'arte*. In *Tied to a Pole* a master tries to prevent his servants drinking his *sake* whilst he is away by tying the arms of one to a long pole and tying the hands of the other behind his back. Between them the servants still manage to drink some wine. The opportunities for both drunken slapstick and punishment should be apparent. In modern day Japan audiences are entertained by *batsu* – game shows where contestants undertake challenges and are beaten if they fail. In this way the pain is a consequence of the competitors' incompetence. In one example of this, *Gaki No Tusaki*, a relay team of four men are punished for losing a race. Their punishment is a 24-hour bout of tag in which they are chased by a range of taggers. The first three individuals to chase them demonstrate slapstick escalation. The first hits them with a fan, the second with a metal ladle and the third is a kick boxer. This works in similar ways to Western slapstick in so far as there is a clear performance frame and the comments from the individuals as they are chased heightens the comedy. Even in China, where the theatrical traditions of *manzai*, *rakugo* and *shouchang* rely more on verbal wit than physical dexterity, slapstick was extensively used in early cinema, with 28 slapstick films being made in the period from 1905 to 1924, almost certainly influenced by Hollywood.

As well as its geographical spread, this monograph has already demonstrated that, historically, slapstick has been a staple of comedy at least since the Greeks, remaining a constant force in Western culture since that time. That it exists in so many corners of the world indicates that it appeals to a wide range of audiences regardless of age, gender, race or status. There are very few forms of performance which can claim such a broad appeal. This is why a detailed analysis of how slapstick appeals to its audience was long overdue.

The ubiquity and longevity of comic violence and comic pain reveal a complex and varied area of comedic performance which richly repays detailed analysis. It is not the case, as Nevitt suggests, that because slapstick pain has no consequences there is 'no need for empathy or analysis' (2013, p. 17). Indeed, analysis is necessary even of the ways in which we might reach such a judgement of non-consequentiality. Even if we were to accept that slapstick pain has no consequences, we would still need to consider how we know that what we are witnessing qualifies as slapstick and is therefore inconsequential. This is likely to be a first step in reaching a decision as to whether or not the pain has any lasting

impact on the victim. As I have illustrated, as viewers, we draw on a range of signifiers in the performance we are watching to reassure us that the pain suffered and witnessed is unlikely to have lasting consequences. These include the performer's reputation, the performance frame of the show or film and the tone established through the use of typical slapstick ingredients such as a double act, sound effects, comic music, responses of the onscreen audience and high levels of absurdity or low levels of realistic reactions. In addition, the skill of the performer is paramount in establishing the viewer's response to slapstick performance.

As has been demonstrated there is a high level of skill present in the performance of slapstick and that skill is supported by sophisticated choices concerning the establishment of the performance frame and the structuring of the slapstick narrative or a simple plot. In early slapstick the plots lacked complexity and were largely constructed to provide opportunities for slapstick activity. In more recent examples the relationship between narrative and slapstick has become more complex and plots might be moved forward by examples of comic violence and pain rather than simply being interrupted by them. The model for analysing comic pain and violence which lies at the heart of this book provides a framework for undertaking the analysis necessary in order to appreciate how the performance of comic pain and violence works. Equally the attention paid here to the ways in which slapstick is structured through the use of techniques such as repetition, inversion, anticipation and escalation, together with elements such as the double act reveals that, in fact, slapstick performance is a fertile field for analysis.

The first part of this book focused on how we recognise slapstick performance and on how our responses to it can be manipulated and influenced by the choices made with regard to structure, performance style and techniques. In order for us to find slapstick comedy funny, it must be framed as such. Often this incorporates elements of absurdity or departures from reality. For example, we know the pain is not real because the victim's response is either inadequate or excessive. Even when the pain is real, the audience can still be encouraged to laugh at its portrayal if it is presented within a strong enough comic frame. The examples drawn from *Jackass* and from reality television shows demonstrate how this can be the case.

In responding to slapstick we are making a range of swift complex judgements. Recognising how readily many of us laugh at the depiction of pain also means acknowledging that *schadenfreude* is alive and well in the twenty-first century. We may not like to admit it but many of us enjoy seeing other people in trouble. Slapstick performance works only

because so many of us have the capacity – when the circumstances are right – to laugh at the suffering of others.

This can be true in life; it is certainly true when the trouble occurs within a performance frame. Steve Carrell's 2013 interview on the *Graham Norton Show* (season 13, episode 12) highlights recognition of the fact that people can be entertained – even perhaps in spite of what they might consider their better judgement – by the comic depiction of suffering. This short section of the interview is very interesting in a number of ways. Speaking of the chest-waxing scene in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, Carrell started from the point that he believed the sequence would be funny for his fellow actors. He focuses on reality and the difficulty of replicating what they were witnessing and 'the joy of watching a man go through something like that'. His assumption is that his peers will gain some enjoyment from watching him suffer. However, the role that empathy plays in our response to the depiction and description of pain is also highlighted as he describes the process for waxing around a nipple. The nipple should be covered in Vaseline before it is waxed, but the actress was not aware of this and covered his nipple directly in wax. At this point in the interview there is an audible gasp from Norton's studio audience. They clearly engage swiftly in the process of imagining its painful consequences. As Carrell continues with the story he explains that the wax is so viscous that it will rip the nipple off. The camera focuses on Norton who demonstrates a very clear physical response to what he is hearing. Norton gasps, he throws his hands up to his head then clenches them in his lap whilst grimacing. He cannot contain his response within his body. His muscles and limbs spontaneously respond to the information received. He responds in this way because he empathises with the potential consequences for Carrell.

The role of empathy in guiding responses to slapstick performance has been shown to be particularly interesting. If we empathise too strongly with the victim we will be too engaged in feelings of sympathy and in imagining how the pain might feel to be able to laugh. If we do not care at all about the characters we may not continue to watch long enough to witness the slapstick punishments they suffer or inflict. As earlier chapters have demonstrated the level to which we empathise with the characters is key in influencing the extent to which we will laugh at their pain. This notion of empathy is, of course, closely related to decisions that we make about morality and deservedness. This is, perhaps, the most powerful single element in governing whether or not we laugh. If we judge that the victim deserves the pain (as for example

the burglars in *Home Alone* clearly do) then, if the slapstick is well performed, we will laugh freely.

For some individuals increasing age brings an increasing consideration of the morality of slapstick. For example, criticism is routinely levelled against the domestic violence depicted in Punch and Judy with the suggestion that watching such violent material has a negative effect on young children. This is why the linked notions of deservedness and justice play such a pivotal role in slapstick. Punch and Judy is unusual in this respect in that few, if any, of Punch's victims deserve what Punch does to them. He, therefore, provides an example of slapstick nastiness by one who does not receive his expected punishment. Often violence in performance, particularly comic violence, can be justified as a kind of morality lesson. *Home Alone* provides this kind of example. The crooks get their comeuppance. In this way, despite its departure from everyday patterns of behaviour slapstick supports the status quo. The violence and pain are used as comic ways of confirming what is and is not acceptable behaviour. As is the case in pantomime it is always clear to the audience who the 'baddies' are and they rarely, with the notable exception of Mr Punch, get away with their evil plots. Slapstick sugar coats a valuable lesson in morality and perhaps, particularly as small children, we are more likely to absorb the message if we are thoroughly engaged and entertained along the way.

While the performance of slapstick pain is ubiquitous, this study has revealed certain absences, most particularly in relation to female performers. It is unusual to see female performers of slapstick either as the aggressor or as the victim, and female performers are notably absent from the examples considered above. *The Money Pit* is one of the few exceptions and even there the female character is only the victim of random and accidental pain, never of intentionally inflicted pain. The other is the more problematic Judy. Casting the net beyond the examples considered earlier does not provide many more examples. In the sitcom *Miranda*, Miranda Hart routinely falls over and off things but she rarely seems to be hurt and the pain she suffers is nearly always self-inflicted, a result of her clumsiness and inability to control her own body. Lucille Ball is another example of a female performer of comedy who is very physical in her approach but she rarely suffers pain unless we, for example, think that she suffers when she over stuffs her mouth with chocolates when trying to keep up with the increasing pace of a production line in the 1952 episode *Job Switching*. It seems that, even within a comedic performance frame, the sight of women in pain is less likely to be found funny. If they are to be shown in pain then the pain must either be self-inflicted or accidental.

Even accidental pain inflicted on women tends to originate from objects or animals rather than from men. Perhaps the spectre of domestic abuse and the long history of male violence to women casts too long a shadow to be eradicated by the techniques of slapstick comedy. It is for this reason that some audiences find Punch and Judy hard to stomach because the situation in which Punch routinely abuses his wife and child holds too many associations with domestic violence, a societal ill which we have never managed to eradicate. It is hard to believe that there is a biological or anatomical reason why women should not perform slapstick comedy but it remains the case that the most convincingly skilled performers of slapstick comedy are men (Chaplin, Keaton, Wisdom, Crawford). Kirsten Anderson Wagner suggests that this may be because 'Women have traditionally been placed in the position of society's moral guardian' (2012, n.p.). The implication is that their role is society is too important for them to make themselves look foolish. One of the few female film stars to engage whole-heartedly in physical slapstick was Mabel Normand, who has already been identified as the thrower of the first custard pie. There is undoubtedly something transgressive in the sight of a middle-aged woman hurling custard pies at men who have annoyed her. Transgression is an integral quality of slapstick and this makes the absence of women pushing the physical comedy boundaries even more surprising. It would be interesting to see forms of slapstick comedy developing in which gender is a less significant issue. There is further research to be done in this area to identify why it is that we laugh more readily at Frank than we would at Frances Spencer.

Slapstick's refusal to play by the rules of normal society is one of the features that contribute to its appeal around the world. Viewers of slapstick can take a vicarious pleasure in the antics of those on stage or screen being hit or doing the hitting. We are entertained by their rowdiness, by the physical horseplay which does not directly affect us. It is entertaining, within a clearly established performance frame, to watch other people being hit, tripped, drenched or falling over. We can take a vicarious pleasure in observing the pain without feeling any of its consequences ourselves and without having to worry about its consequences for the performer.

Slapstick is as much a part of our own cultural landscape now as it has ever been. There are recent signs, for example in *The Hangover* trilogy, of films of a more sustained and narratively complex form of slapstick being developed in which the traditional use of comic violence and pain is more closely integrated into the plot. Despite slapstick's lowbrow cultural status and its relative lack of consideration in the academy,

it continues to entertain viewers with its depiction of the mighty brought low and of wrongdoing physically punished.

It is my hope that this study has demonstrated the complexities of this apparently simple mode of performance. Knowing how slapstick works does not deprive us of the pleasure of laughing at it but increases our enjoyment as we recognise the skill and structures at work in making us laugh at the slaps entertainingly inflicted on a deserving victim whose exaggerated cries or understated reactions demonstrate clearly the lack of reality of the pain being inflicted.

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