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The Grave World of Trevor Noah's Serio-Comedy: Intersection between Apartheid Nuances and the Autobiographical

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ABSTRACT

In the past several years – two decades at the very least – the appetite for laughter in Africa has inspired the emergence of a fascinating artistic and business opportunity: the comedy industry. Consequently, standup comedy as a performed art has gained currency in Africa. Initially, the dominant designs of comedy on the continent's performing arts landscape included mainly slapstick TV comedy, caricature and art by street jesters. Like any other form of performed art, standup comedy has invariably been appropriated to reflect (on) the triumphs, aspirations, dilemmas and struggles of the African people. This background has made scholarly inquiry into this genre of comedy necessary. As such, this paper seeks to investigate the work of a South African standup comedian, Trevor Noah, as serious (and beyond comedy art) that discourses over grave issues affecting his life and the lives of those within the immediate society in which he lived in apartheid South Africa and by extension, post-apartheid South Africa. The paper shall also examine how this comedian uses his art to find space in America as an emigrant. Noah's work falls in the category of cultural productions that are referred to as the art of "the serio-comic" (Ruganda, 1996). The paper shall interrogate Noah's presentation of, and commentary on the serious in a humourous way through the theoretical framework of the classical theories of humour, namely: superiority theory, incongruity theory and relief theory. The superiority theory shall be appropriated to read laughter as an expression of power and/or aggression over the other; the incongruity paradigm to read laughter as an act resulting out of discordance between two words, two sets of statements or ideas; and the relief theory to interpret laughter as a form of release of tension that builds up in the course of a humourous construction. This paper shall strive to examine how the foregoing functions of humour are used by the artist to make commentary on grave issues in his comedy. Finally, it will interrogate the various tropes of time and space that Trevor Noah uses to articulate his comedic truths.

Keywords: Standup Comedy, Serio-comedy, Apartheid, Post-apartheid South Africa

1. INTRODUCTION

In past two decades – at the very least – the appetite for laughter in Africa has motivated the emergence of a serious artistic and business undertaking: the comedy industry. Subsequent to that, stand-up comedy as a performed art has become popular on the continent both as an art and as a career. Initially, the dominant designs of comedy on Africa's performing arts landscape included mainly slapstick TV comedy, caricature and outdoor performances by street jesters. Like any other form of performed art, stand-up comedy has inescapably been used to reflect (on) the triumphs, aspirations and struggles of the African people. This function has made scholarly inquiry into this genre of comedy not just necessary, but timely. This must be so, seeing as we do that there are unexplored areas of scholarship on the subject of stand-up comedy, across the globe, especially in Africa.

By studying purposively sampled YouTube videos, this paper seeks to investigate the work of a South African stand-up comedian, Trevor Noah. The chapter hypothesizes that Noah's work can be read as serious art – beyond comedy – as discourse that offers commentary on social, political and economic issues. The episodes will include *Live at the Apollo, Lost in Translation, It's My Culture*, and *Melbourne Comedy Festival*. Indeed, the chapter argues that Noah's work falls in the category of such art as is referred to as the art of the serio-comic (Ruganda, 1996). Recognizing what lies beneath the veneer of comedy, the chapter takes off from the assumption that Trevor Noah's work is a contribution to the debate on the issues that defined apartheid South Africa and/or continue to dominate the post-apartheid South African society. The chapter shall also examine how this comedian uses his art to find space in America as an emigrant, and how he negotiates for his space in the world as a global citizen.

The chapter shall interrogate the stand-up comedy through the theoretical framework of the classical theories of humour, namely: superiority/hostility theory, incongruity theory and relief theory as expounded in Double (1991) and Morreall (2009, 1987). The hostility/superiority theory shall be used to read laughter as an expression of superiority and/or aggression over the other; the incongruity paradigm to read laughter as an act resulting out of discordance between two words; two worlds; two sets of statements or ideas; and the relief theory to investigate laughter and humour as forms of release of tension that builds up in the course of a humourous construction. The broader aim is to examine how these functions of humour are used by Trevor Noah to bring serious issues to bear in his comedy. Besides, it will examine the

various tropes of time and space that this comedian uses to articulate his truths.

2. STAND-UP COMEDY AS A GENRE

Stand-up comedy can be defined as a humourous talk during the delivery of which the performer(s) interacts with a live audience. Double (2014) defines it as an encounter between a performer and an audience, in which case the performer stands before an audience and talks and/or acts with the intention of amusing or entertaining them. Double (2014) goes further to outline the features of stand-up comedy, which include: the funniness and personality of the performer, direct communication between the performer and audience, and the use of present tense to enhance addressivity (Adetunji, 2016) during the live performance. To these properties, Adetunji (2016) adds presence of comic content, audience expectation of amusement, spontaneity in performer-audience interaction and performer proximity to the audience.

According Brodie (2008), stand-up comedy is an art of intimacy. The context of its performance allows for intimacy between the performer and his audience because there is live "reaction, participation, and engagement on the part of those to whom the stand-up comedian is speaking." (p. 153). Brodie (2008) proceeds to state that even if it is recorded for broadcast, the recording ensures that the audience is included in the mediation so that the interaction between performer and audience "is a dialogic one" (p. 154). This makes stand-up comedy one of the least one-sided performer-audience engagements among the performed arts. Although Brodie (2008), like Double (1991) before him, refers to a stand-up performance as a solo act, several cases have proven that two performers or more can deliver humour on stage in the stand-up fashion.

Some scholars in the field opine that the most defining characteristic of stand-up comedy relates to the effect it has on the audience: it is meant to induce laughter. As such, Brodie (2008) defines it in terms of 'revelation of humour, by the performer, and 'reaction by the audience'. Stand-up comedy is not only a spoken art, but also involves elements of music, folklore and utilizes verbal and non-verbal cues in its delivery. Double (2014) asserts that stand-up comedy does not necessarily involve direct speech from the performer to the audience. In some instances, the performer may communicate to unseen and/or imaginary characters within the world of the act, or in cases where there is a double act, one performer may address another.

3. THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL: TREVOR NOAH'S LIFE AND ART

Trevor Noah uses comedy to tell the real life stories of his own life, and the lives of fellow South Africans who have lived the experiences of apartheid, and later, in the post-apartheid rainbow nation era. He fashions humour out of his own background as a coloured child who grows up in a mixed family at the height of apartheid. A reading of his comedy about his own life and family is in concurrence with the life story that he tells in his memoir, *Born a Crime*. Hence, at the level of text, the concept of intertextuality can in fact be used to read the intersections between the story of his life in the humour he performs, and the story of his life as he tells it in his book, *Born a Crime*.

In one of the episodes dubbed *Live at the Apollo*, he improvises with the audience to deliver a commentary about what he went through as a child – about his parentage and early childhood.

> Apartheid was a law in South Africa that made it illegal for blacks and whites to interact with each other. (*To the audience*) For instance, there's a black lady here sitting with a white guy. If you did this in South Africa they'd arrest you guys. Well, they'd arrest the black one, they'd just ask you (*to a white man in the audience*) not to do it again. I grew up in a mixed family, with me being the mixed one. My mother is a black woman; South African; my father is Swiss; from Switzerland … I was born a crime, which is something they didn't think through, because we couldn't live normally….

Morreall (1984) writes on the seriousness of comedy, and his ideas can be used to put into perspective the idea of turning one's tragedies into comedy. Away from the laughter, Trevor Noah goes on to narrate how as a family, they could not even walk together on the street. His father had to be walking across the road, only waving at him occasionally. Because of the fear of being seen holding a coloured child (which would be sufficient proof that she is in a relationship with a white man and therefore broken the law), his mother would let go off his hand any time the police appeared. In *Born a Crime*, he writes about his early life experiences thus:

> Nine months after that yes, on February 20, 1984, my mother checked into Hillbrow Hospital for a scheduled C-section delivery. Estranged from her family, pregnant by a man she could not be seen with in public, she was alone. The doctors took her up to the delivery room, cut open her belly, and reached in and pulled out a half-white, half-black child who violated any number of laws, statutes, and regulations—I was born a crime. (Noah, 2016, pp. 23-24)

The extent to which victims of apartheid were dehumanized also becomes apparent in Trevor's comedy. Children who were products of supposedly illicit sexual relationships between blacks and whites were rendered race-less upon birth. Little wonder therefore, that Trevor Noah narrates how he suffered the ignominy of being called unpalatable names: the apartheid system assigned him no race by referring to him as one of mixed breed or half cast. Besides, his mother also suffers the horror of apartheid because she is alienated by both her black family, and the apartheid system.

Trevor also takes time to ruminate on the rigours of his job as a comedian. From the episode in *Live at the Apollo*, it emerges that the pressure accruing from his work as a comedian is so intense, as to require some form of release. Here, therefore, the theory of release can be used to make sense of his rendition in this episode. The release theory of humour holds that laughter functions as a vent that releases tensions, or psychic energy, thereby making one feel liberated. The most notable proponent of this theory is Sigmund Freud, who formulated the psychoanalytic theory of humour (Shwarz, 2010). According to this theory, humour functions as an outlet of unwanted energy from the mind of the performer and the audience. Freud (1960), as quoted in Monrreall (1987), opines that laughter is "an outlet for psychic or nervous energy" (p.111).

In this regard, Trevor raises concern about the one-sided affair of comedy in the sense that the audience expects too much from the comedian, and that the greatness of the comedian or lack thereof, is judged by how much the audience find the comedian entertaining and exhibit noise in form of laughter. He uses the analogy of sex to meditate loudly on this situation.

> Comedy is like sex … me the comedian, playing the role of the man; and you the audience the role of the woman … my job is to satisfy you; and you just have to sit there … just like sex, my success or failure is determined by how much noise you make during my performance – which makes it a one-sided affair..

Besides being a means of purging the nervous psychic energy – usually negative – that he has accumulated in the course of his work, Trevor may also be commenting on the expectations that the society has placed on the head of the man with regard to sexual relationships. According to Schwarz, (2010) laughter can also be applied to liberate human beings from the tension, fear and restriction of discussing taboo topics, or subjects that part or all of the audience are uncomfortable discussing. In line with this, we can then conclude that Trevor relates sex to comedy in order to hide behind the shield of comedy in discussing the often publicly evaded topic of sex, and how the balance of blame in the subject of sex, easily tips in the direction of the man.

In another rendition in *Live at the Apollo* he uses his real life experiences to deflate the pressure accumulated as a result of his work, and people's perceptions about his career as a comedian. In spite of the challenging terrain he has to navigate in order to satisfy demanding audiences in many parts of the world, it is also clear that many people do not consider comedy as a serious career in its own. To many, it does not add up that one would want to make a career out of jokes. Trevor gets over this difficulty by laughing at his own situation, thereby deriving satisfaction from his work. He relates a case of his father who does not think that it is enough for his son to claim that he has a career, yet all he does is tour the globe making jokes. To his father, with no other job to do, Trevor is nothing more than a clown.

The use of humour as a means of attaining catharsis; as a vent of purging negative psychic energy; of letting of unnecessary steam from the mind, or as an occasion of therapy, is appreciated by Trevor Noah himself, even in his thinking outside of comedy. In his own words during a speech delivered at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation sponsored conference dubbed 'Goalkeepers', Trevor asserts: "When you laugh, you can't be controlled by fear." Little wonder therefore, that Trevor makes fun of an incident as serious as the shooting of his own mother. He juxtaposes the pain of his mother having been shot in the head, with the absurdity of his brother crying at the hospital that he needed a PlayStation to elicit laughter in himself as a form of release. In a similar fashion, he juxtaposes the unsavoury moments and experiences in his life with absurd scenarios, thereby eliciting laughter, and subsequently, attaining the much needed release. The pairing of incongruous situations (the serious and the absurd) concurs with the incongruity theory of humour as advanced by Double (1991).

4. PARABLES OF APARTHEID AND POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

In his 1872 book titled *The Expression of the Emotions of Man and Animals*, Charles Darwin states that laughter is a social expression that emerges out of the human desire to articulate happiness. Between 1948 And 1993, happiness in South Africa became too expensive for the native blacks to come by because of apartheid. In this context, it became necessary to create happiness in order to help the victims of apartheid navigate the rigours and tragedies of living at the time of institutionalized racial segregation. Later, during the post-apartheid era, humour in effect acts as an outlet to vent the negative energy accumulated over the years because of what black people had gone through. Hence, the hostility theory (Allen, 1998; Suls, 1977) and the release theory of humour (Freud, 1960; Schwarz, 2010) can be used to read humour as a tool by which the oppressed during the time of apartheid; and post-apartheid South Africa used to confront the oppressor.

According to Freud (1960) in his *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, build-up of negative psychic energy fuels emotional release so that "this superfluous energy is what is discharged in the muscular movements of laughter" (Quoted in Shwarz, 2010, p. 52). This section of the chapter looks at the function of Trevor Noah's humour in dispelling negative psychic energy occasioned by apartheid at an individual level (for Trevor himself) and a communal level (for his immediate extended audience).

In many of his performances, Trevor makes references to the various apartheid laws that were meant to segregate black people in their own land. The laws were so devastating to the black natives that with a tinge of brutal humour, Trevor Noah corrupts the word 'Apartheid' (or in fact normalizes it to mean what it really was) into '*apart hate'* adding, "apart hate, is what it was!" The most personal of these laws to him is the Immorality Act of 1927 which declared sexual relationships between blacks and whites in South Africa not just illegal, but sinful. In its own words, the *Immorality Act, 1927*, was enacted "To prohibit illicit carnal intercourse between Europeans and natives and other acts in relation thereto." (Noah, 2016, p. 06).

Trevor becomes both a victim and a product of this absurd law. Victim of it because he is rendered race-less right from birth, only being referred to as one of mixed race; product of it because he has had to outlive the anger and bitterness of growing up without enjoying the presence of both parents, not because they were separated or divorced, but because the apartheid regime deprecated black people. In *Live at the Apollo*, he speaks having been born a crime because the relationship between his mother (a black Xhosa woman) and his father (a white Swiss) had been made illegitimate by the *Immorality Act of 1927*. Another dimension to the horrors of apartheid also emerges in this episode: apartheid was bad enough for black people, but it was worse for black women. Trevor's mother is alienated by his black family who believe she has betrayed blacks by loving a white man, and consequently leave her alone in hospital at childbirth. Besides that, she is always haunted and scared at the reality of having broken the apartheid regulation, and hence is always on the brink of being arrested.

Although apartheid ended, the injustices which abound with it did not go away in post-apartheid South Africa. These

injustices, against the black population especially, continue to afflict the people of South Africa politically, socially and economically. For the case of economic injustices, they are intensified in the form of endemic corruption that goes on unabated beyond apartheid. Trevor Noah is in fact ahead of time to extensively address the matter of 'State Capture' in South Africa. Sitorus (2011) defines state capture as the seizing, by any group or social strata external to the state, of decisive influence over state policies and institutions for selfish interest, and against the public good.

Trevor ridicules Jacob Zuma's association with the Gupta family, who are accused of using their massive economic influence to control the state. On his part, Zuma becomes a mere puppet, an appendage of the entrenched political and economic forces in South Africa, which advance corruption to benefit themselves, in the name of development.

> We get a tender for ten bridges; we build none. Come on guys, build nine, steal one! At least have some progress. (Mimicking Zuma) Now, there is no bridge … it was supposed to be there! Just imagine it's there.

The mockery of Zuma continues in this very episode, while showing that he does not speak a word of his own, even in his speeches in parliament, rather, he has allowed himself to become the mouthpiece of the Gupta family who dictate every word he utters. It is an episode that concurs with Dassah (2018) who writes:

> On national television, then Deputy Minister of Finance, Mcebisi Jonas, said the Gupta brothers, who are not only friends of the President but also business partners of his son, had allegedly offered him the position of Minister of Finance before the then incumbent, Nhlanhla Nene, was dismissed on 09 December 2015 and replaced by Des van Rooyen. (p. 1)

Trevor Noah takes advantage of Zuma's hesitant speech behavior and turns it on its head, showing a Zuma who reads his speeches, while pausing to get instructions from members of the Gupta family via an earpiece. Trevor subverts what would be considered a speech idiosyncrasy with the intention of creating humour and ridiculing Zuma and his government as incapable of making independent decisions because the Guptas are too powerful to let them. In the final analysis, Trevor seems to be saying that apartheid may have been abolished on paper, but problems that were associated with it, remain prevalent in post-apartheid South Africa.

5. CONCLUSION

This chapter set out to appreciate Trevor Noah's comedy as art operating beyond the level of laughter-instigating comedy, with the point of departure being the assertion that comedy is always serious (Morreall, 1984 and Ruganda, 1986). By use of the theories of reading humour namely: hostility theory, incongruity theory and release theory (Morreall, 1987, 1998 and Scharz, 2010), the chapter has endevoured to read various comical performances by Trevor Noah as fundamentally serious instances and incidents in defining his past, present and future within his immediate world, and the wider globe. Specifically, the chapter has investigated how Trevor defines his own identity, the role of his comedy in re-narrating and re-dramatising apartheid, the questions of immigration, blackness and American identity, and the use of tropes such as the airport in articulating grave issues of the past, present and future. It is therefore safe to conclude that Trevor Noah, though functioning in stand-up comedy – a genre in popular culture – adds his voice to the greater debates that started and continue to be dramatized in classical and mainstream theatre in Africa

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