

## The dimensions of British humour in theatre

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**Abstract:** In a time marked by profound changes, the concept of “culture” transcends traditional definitions and extends into the complex realm of interactions between creation, research and society, being perceived as a dynamic process that reflects and influences contemporary realities. This global perspective allows for a broader understanding of cultural phenomena, and academic research becomes essential for analysing and understanding these dynamics. Based on this premise, the study of British humour in contemporary Romanian spectacular arts, the subject of this research, becomes relevant not only in terms of the complexity of its translation and adaptation, but also in terms of the socio-historical and cultural influences that shape its perception by the Romanian public. Also relevant is the way in which British humour transcends centuries and cultural spaces, crossing linguistic boundaries and facing the challenges of translation, as well as paradigm shifts and major changes within the art of theatre. Thus, humour becomes a spiritual imprint, an instrument of introspection and social connection.

**Keywords:** British humour, theatre, audience, interdisciplinary, translation.

### Introduction

Humour has been a constant in human society since the earliest forms of civilisation, evolving according to historical, political, economic, cultural and religious contexts. We can consider this concept a “total social fact”<sup>1</sup>, as it facilitates the integration of individuals into the community and their adaptation to the norms and customs of the social environment. A synthesis of the subjective and the objective, of intellect and affectivity, humour presents a complexity that makes it difficult to define or, on the contrary, offers the possibility of a large number of incomplete definitions. G.K. Chesterton, in his article on humour – *Encyclopaedia Britannica*<sup>2</sup> – states that attempting to define humour is to be humourless. George Bernard Shaw has a similar opinion, as does the English novelist and humorist Jerome K. Jerome. The scholar Solomon

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<sup>1</sup> *The total social fact* is a methodological process created by French sociologist Marcel Mauss in which the object of study requires the observation of all areas of social life (religion, politics, economics, history, aesthetics, etc.).

<sup>2</sup> G.K. Chesterton (1928), *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://nonsenselit.com/g-k-chesterton-humour-1938/> (accessed on 10 February 2025).

Marcus humorously mentioned how this subject should be treated: “Do not make the mistake of venturing into definitions. Take humour in the most empirical way possible, in all its forms: comedy, mockery, jokes, anecdotes, witticisms, irony, pranks, farce, satire, caricature, amusement”<sup>3</sup>.

Although humour is a universal language, it is nevertheless specific to each culture. Time has crystallised differences between peoples, nations and races in its creation and reception, with each community presenting a typical form of humour. Terry Eagleton notes in a study that humour can be treated “as a text or as a language with countless regional accents. You cannot expect to hear the same specific laughter in Belize and in London, and in Belgravia”<sup>4</sup>.

This article is an exploratory study that aims to serve as a starting point for the study of British humour in contemporary Romanian spectacular arts, providing a basis for further investigation into humour as a spiritual imprint and cultural phenomenon.

### Current state of the literature

Comedy has a close relationship with a whole range of manifestations of this cultural-human dimension, and *humour* occupies a special place. Like laughter or comedy, this versatile phenomenon takes many forms. Patrice Pavis, comparing humour with irony, states that the latter often gives “an impression of coldness and intellectual detachment”, defining humour as warmer – “it scrutinises the hidden philosophical aspects of existence and reveals the humourist's great inner richness”<sup>5</sup>. The theorist Terry Eagleton quotes William Hazlitt in his work *Humour* in an attempt to better “capture” this phenomenon: “Sometimes it nestles in a clever question, a witty answer, a spiritual argument, a subtle allusion, a skilfully amusing objection or an intelligent retort; sometimes it hides in a bold, e turn of phrase, in cutting irony, in vigorous hyperbole, in a striking metaphor, in a plausible reconciliation of contradictions, or in outrageous nonsense.”<sup>6</sup>

For a long time, this concept was considered an English monopoly, both as a term and as a practice. It is known throughout the world that British humour is unique in its refinement, subtlety of irony and, above all, self-irony. It has evolved along with British society and culture, without neglecting influences from outside. British humour is not only open-minded, but also complex and

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<sup>3</sup> Solomon Marcus, *Umorul, dincolo de divertisment* [Essay: Humour, beyond entertainment (I)], in „România literară”, no. 9/2015, *apud* Revista „Limba Română”, no. 1-2, 2015, <https://www.limbaromana.md/index.php?go=articole&n=3085> (accessed on 10 February 2025).

<sup>4</sup> Terry Eagleton (2019). *Humour*, translated by Mihai Moroiu, Editura Baroque Books & Arts, București, p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> Patrice Pavis (2012). *Theatre Dictionary*, translated by Nicoleta Popa-Blanariu and Florentina Floria, Editura Fides, Iași, pp. 68-69;

<sup>6</sup> William Hazlitt (1963). “On Wit and Humour”, in *Lectures on the English Comic Writers*, London, p. 63, *apud* Terry Eagleton, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

surrealistically inventive. It can be intelligent and ironic, vulgar, satirical, surreal or pathetic. For the British, any social sins can be forgiven if the person who commits them is able to laugh at them. Voltaire recognised the peculiarities of British humour, but not the origin of the word. Madame de Staël attempted to find a definition: “The English language has created a word, *humour*, to express that cheerfulness which is a disposition of the blood almost as much as of the spirit; it is connected with the nature of the climate and the national character”<sup>7</sup>. Starting in the 15th and 16th centuries, British humour indicated a direction of the national spirit, seeking a deliberately realistic comedy, in which instinctive cold-bloodedness is combined with a little disguised malice. With the Renaissance, refined humour emerged from the sphere of cultivated minds. The two directions ran parallel until Shakespeare brought them together. William Temple was the first to highlight English superiority in humour, finding three causes for it: “the native wealth of the land, the tranquillity of government and the instability of the climate”<sup>8</sup>. He also theorises about the origins of humour, stating that it is not a characteristic of the individual, but rather a hereditary trait: “every individual has humour without effort, because those in his family had it”<sup>9</sup>. Approximately three hundred years later, a team of Canadian researchers conducted a study (for telegraph.co.uk) according to which the British penchant for crude comedy and humour at the expense of others is genetically inherited.<sup>10</sup>

During the Restoration, Irish playwright George Farquhar was awarded the title of *Citizen of Humour*. In 1702, he published a collection of verse and prose that included *Discourse on Comedy in Relation to the English Stage*, “an anti-classical essay against unities.” Another Restoration playwright, William Congreve, detected in his essay *On Temperament in Comedy* (1689) the specificity of the English temperament and the traits through which it can become a source of humour. A contrary point of view on the specificity of humour is held by Pirandello, in an essay published in 1908, entitled *L'umorismo*, in which he states that he does not believe that there is such a thing as national humour, but only accidental identities highlighted by the individual creations of humourists of the same literature.

Humour is undoubtedly a serious theme and a fundamental dimension of our cultural and social life, without which the theatrical space would certainly be much bleaker. Now, more than ever, it is important that the values that define Western culture be affirmed as the hallmarks of a civilisation that has paid its tribute to history in order to gain the freedom to laugh. And humour is the

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<sup>7</sup> Madame de Staël (1967). *On Literature*, in *Scrieri Alese* [Selected Writings], Editura pentru Literatură Universală, București, p. 345.

<sup>8</sup> William Temple (1962). *Of Ancient and Modern Learning*, quoted in Marian Popa, *op. cit.*, p. 293.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 294.

<sup>10</sup> Andy Bloxham (2008). *British humour dictated by genetics*, March, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1581251/British-humour-dictated-by-genetics.html>, accessed on 20 February 2025.

measure of this freedom, which was not inherent to Western civilisation, but a value earned over time.

### Identifying a research niche

The need to study British humour in the context of contemporary Romanian theatre is based primarily on the fact that, at present, there is no large-scale scientific work in Romania that includes a detailed analysis of British humour in relation to contemporary Romanian theatre, despite the fact that the topic has the potential to reveal new perspectives and theatrical practices, both from a theoretical and practical point of view.

There are many works and researchers discussing humour, and multiple definitions have emerged from psychological, philosophical, aesthetic and linguistic studies. A whole range of theorists and aestheticians, from Aristotle with his *Poetics* to Immanuel Kant and Sigmund Freud, and including Henri Bergson's *Theory of Laughter* and Marian Popa's *Comicology* – all have attempted to capture humour in one definition or another. Harold Bloom's studies<sup>11</sup> on humour in the works of authors such as William Shakespeare, George Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde provide a solid theoretical basis, but there is no comprehensive study on the particularities of translating British humour in theatre and the challenges involved in adapting it for Romanian audiences. A few studies explore the general problems of dramatic translation, such as the transposition of language, style and rhythm in plays. Research on the adaptation of British humour in Romanian theatre is fragmented, focusing more on specific authors and contexts, e.g. *Traduceri și imitațiuni românești după literatura engleză* [Romanian Translations and Imitations of English Literature] (1924) by Dragoș Protopopescu or *Shakespeare in Romania. A bibliographical essay* (1964) by Alexandru Duțu or *G.B. Shaw in Romania* (1968) by Ileana Berlogea, but they do not provide a systematic and detailed analysis of how British humour is translated and received in particular.

The research niche identified after consulting the specialist literature therefore consists of exploring the challenges of translating and adapting British humour in theatre, with a special focus on the impact of this process on the Romanian public and on the comparative analysis of cultural sensibilities between the two nations. The translation of humour remains one of the less theorised aspects of *translation studies*, which is itself a relatively new discipline. With its deep roots in a specific cultural and linguistic context, British humour poses a huge challenge for translators. Another important niche identified is the comparative analysis between British and Romanian humour. Identifying the similarities and differences between the two forms of humour can highlight the particularities of each culture, as well as how British humour is

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<sup>11</sup> Harold Bloom (1998). *Shakespeare. The invention of the human*, Riverhead Books, New York.

reinterpreted to suit the Romanian audience. The research investigates the extent to which British humour can be directly transferred into the Romanian cultural space or whether significant changes in text and interpretation are necessary for British plays to be correctly received in Romania.

In the history of Romanian theatre, playwrights such as Oscar Wilde and G.B. Shaw are less represented in the repertoires of Romanian theatres. In contrast, contemporary British playwrights – Martin McDonagh, Sarah Kane, Nick Payne, and Mike Bartlett – have found a stronger echo, especially on the stage of independent theatres in Romania, but also increasingly on that of state theatres. For example, while the current repertoire of the ACT Theatre includes five plays based on British texts: *Lungs* by Duncan Macmillan, *An Intervention* by Mike Bartlett, *Constellations* by Nick Payne, *Girls and Boys* by Dennis Kelly, *It's True, It's True, It's True!* by Breach Theatre, the repertoire of the National Theatre in Bucharest includes only three: *Beginners* by Tim Crouch, *Incognito* by Nick Payne and *'s Memory of Water* by Shelagh Stephenson. This has led to the need for an in-depth analysis of the reception of British humour in Romanian theatre.

Theatres in Romania are showing an increasing interest in diversifying their repertoire, and British texts, known for their international success, are a valuable source in this regard. The proposed research has the potential to contribute significantly to this process by analysing how Romanian theatre has absorbed and adapted British humour. This investigation can provide theatre directors with relevant methodological tools for repertoire selection, facilitating a better understanding of the integration of international influences in the local context.

In the context of globalisation, it is important to understand how different cultures influence each other. Understanding these cultural interactions is essential to examining how artistic traditions and styles combine and evolve. Successful adaptations of British plays in Romania can become a model for cultural cooperation and future intercultural exchanges. In addition, humour is often a means of reflecting society, revealing its concerns, tensions and values. This research can facilitate a deeper understanding of how contemporary Romanian society interprets themes such as power, inequality, identity or the absurdity of existence. This will have a significant impact on how current social and cultural themes are addressed and discussed.

## Conclusions

Adapting British humour involves a complex dynamic between translation, interpretation and audience perception, confirming that theatre is a field of ongoing cultural negotiation. This study highlights the need for an in-depth analysis of how British humour evolves in the context of Romanian theatre and its impact on the audience. The conclusions may contribute to the development

of a theatre repertoire that is better anchored in current realities and may also serve as a reference for theatres in Romania interested in coherent programming tailored to the needs of the audience.

With its unique characteristics, British humour offers an ideal platform for reconnecting audiences with the art of theatre, making a significant contribution to understanding current cultural dynamics and interactions between different cultural spaces. At the same time, it becomes, for me, an authentic research endeavour.

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