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Court jesters of the GDR: the political *clowns-* *theatre* of Wenzel & Mensching

ABSTRACT

The Da Da eR clown productions of Hans-Eckardt Wenzel and Steffen Mensching were deemed too risky for publication in East Germany (the GDR) and have largely remained a secret among the initiated. Originally members of the Liedertheater (song theatre) group 'Karls Enkel', Wenzel and Mensching branched out from 1982 onwards into the realm of clowns, acquainting themselves with the history and theory of this theatrical tradition from commedia dell'arte through to Karl Valentin. With their masks, parodic linguistic hybrids and awareness of the particular significance of body, time and space that constitutes the clown's chronotope (Bakhtin 1981), they created a grotesque mise-en-scène from which to comment on the last years of the GDR, finally laying the dying state to rest in a chorus of laughter in 1989. This article will also show how Wenzel and Mensching dealt artistically with the abrupt shift from socialist to capitalist society in the 1990s after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

KEYWORDS

Liedertheater
(song theatre)
GDR
censorship
clowns
carnival
comedy
Bakhtin
political song
German unification

1. An earlier version of this article appeared as "Wenzel & Mensching: A Carnavalesque Clowns' Act Spanning the GDR and United Germany", in *German Studies Review* XXIII, 1, 2000, pp. 53–68.
2. Berlin *Tagesspiegel* quoted in concert program of the *Hammer-Revue*, Potsdam, 11 December 1993. All translations from the original German titles and texts in this article are by David Robb.
3. The former received an Amiga golden record for sales in the GDR.
4. It was always unclear whether the Karl referred to Karl Marx or Karl Valentin. The ambiguity, however, could be exploited by the group wherever it suited them.
5. The FDJ were actively involved in the promotion of all youth music concerts. It was usually inconceivable to put on a show without the consent of the FDJ. See Robb 1998:156–165.

INTRODUCTION

'There are times when one has to be a fool or a clown to survive unscathed.' (Programme entry for *Latest from the Da Da eR*, Schwerin Film Festival, October 1990)

The film *Latest from the Da Da eR* (Deutsche Film AG) directed by Jörg Foth and written by and featuring the East German poet clowns Hans-Eckardt Wenzel and Steffen Mensching has just been released on DVD in the UK and in North America in the autumn of 2009. For the first time this remarkable political clownesque phenomenon has finally been made available to an English speaking audience. The following article will examine the work of the duo in the historical context of the final years of the GDR and, in doing so, present Wenzel and Mensching's act as an example of political comedy in a context of censorship and taboo. It will explore how the duo, faced with the transformation from socialist to capitalist society in the early 1990s, drew on their knowledge of the clown's tradition of humour from *commedia dell'arte* up to Valentin and Brecht to keep their comedy sharp and relevant.

For twenty years together Hans-Eckardt Wenzel and Steffen Mensching formed a theatrical clowns' act that spanned the 1980s in the GDR and the 1990s in united Germany.¹ Described by the Berlin *Tagesspiegel* as 'Brecht plus Goethe times Weill to the power of Eisler divided by Valentin equals Wenzel & Mensching!';² they did indeed constitute a mixture of literary cabaret, political song and clownesque comedy. Originally they were members of the East Berlin *Liedertheater* (song theatre) group 'Karls Enkel', who, between 1976 and 1985, built up an ardent following in the GDR amongst students, intellectuals and fans of folk and political song. Abetted by this exposure Wenzel and Mensching also carved careers for themselves as poets. But while their respective poetry volumes (Wenzel 1984, 1986; Mensching 1984a, 1987) and Wenzel's records (Wenzel [1987] 1995; Wenzel [1989] 1995)³ always sold out immediately, Karls Enkel's *Liedertheater* productions were deemed too risky for publication and to this day have remained a secret amongst the initiated. Their only legacy lies in the video recordings and manuscripts collected throughout the 1980s by the Song Centre of the Academy of Arts in East Berlin. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in autumn 1989 Wenzel and Mensching's reputation spread in the wake of DEFA's film adaptation of *Latest from the Da Da eR* (1990) and accolades such as the *Heinrich-Heine-Preis* (1990), the *Deutscher Kleinkunstpreis* of Mainz (1991) and the *Kabarettpreis* of Nuremberg (1995). Since the duo broke up in 1999 both have pursued successful careers, Wenzel as a solo singer-songwriter winning countless national prizes for his song albums including his German adaptation of Woody Guthrie songs on *Ticky Tock* (2003), and Mensching as a poet and author with critically acclaimed novels such as *Jacobs Leiter* (2003) and recently as the manager of the theatre of Rudolstadt. But it is their, mostly unknown, work as theatrical clowns in the GDR which will form the basis of this article. With reference to the theory of Mikhail Bakhtin, one of Wenzel and Mensching's sources of inspiration, I would like to examine the comedic essence of an extraordinary clown act which bridged two political systems.

Karls Enkel (meaning 'Karl's grandchildren')⁴ formed in Berlin in the autumn of 1976 at the time of the controversial expulsion from the GDR of dissident protest singer Wolf Biermann. Their first programme of songs earned them the nickname 'Biermann's Enkel' from the Central Committee of the Free German Youth (FDJ),⁵ but a motion to ban them was defeated on

their behalf by a friend in the Berlin District Committee of the FDJ (Körbel 1993). Thus began a thirteen-year career on the borderline between tolerance and prohibition. In this sensitive period in GDR arts, new techniques were being explored to express the inexpressible or taboo, resulting in the emergence of a whole culture of signs and subtexts. One system which lent itself to this practice of codification was the Russian literary theorist and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnival. At the time Wenzel and Mensching were students of 'cultural studies and aesthetics' at the Humboldt University in East Berlin where Professor Wolfgang Heise introduced them to the available Bakhtin work in German at that time, *Literatur und Karneval* (1969). The self-renewing significance of the carnival during the so-called stagnation years of the GDR was readily viewed as a potential secret code: a metaphor for change or otherness. Researching carnivalesque theatre forms such as the *commedia dell'arte*, Wenzel and Mensching perfected techniques such as masked role play, the use of puppets, illogical use of stage objects and robust slapstick comedy, incorporating these into their literary, political song act. All these factors culminated in Karls Enkel's grotesque reflection of GDR reality on stage.

MASKS AND CARNIVAL IN THE GDR

After initial experimentation in *A Goethe Evening* in 1982, it was in the *Hammer-Revue* later the same year that Wenzel and Mensching were to realize the full theatrical potential of the carnivalesque. This joint project of Karls Enkel, Beckert & Schulz, and Wacholder was conceived against the background of simmering political disenchantment, increased by the stationing of new Soviet SS20 rockets in the GDR and the prohibition of the unofficial peace movement known as 'Swords to Ploughs'. Indeed the taboo theme of pacifism was to feature strongly in the revue.

The *Hammer-Revue* was an evening of songs, music, poetry and clown scenes. The production took the form and structure of a Piscator proletarian revue of the 1920s, but this was ironically inverted to parody socialist reality of the 1980s itself. While, for example, the main characters of the 'Red Revues' had been the capitalist, the policeman and the proletarian hero, those of the *Hammer-Revue* were the dictator, the general, the 'fellow traveller' and the clown. The ambivalent characteristics of these figures, on the other hand, derived much from the *commedia dell'arte*. In adapting these two alternative theatrical forms for the GDR stage, the directors Wenzel and Mensching unearthed a basic irony: Piscator's revues, like the *commedia dell'arte*, had parodied precisely the historical master-servant relationship which the GDR claimed to have resolved.

Also of significance were the costumes and full masks, worn in a Karls Enkel production for the first time. These, as particularly evident in the debut of Wenzel and Mensching as the clowns Weh and Meh, served to increase the potential for political parody. The donning of masks had traditionally been a satirical response to the social masks of convention and etiquette. As Rudolf Münz states, its function was 'to expose the masked-ness of life by using masks' (Münz 1979: 97). In 1993, after viewing a video recording of the original *Hammer-Revue* performance, Wenzel remembered the institutionalized masking of the truth in the GDR:

It was as if the actors from that time, as masked realists, had set their *last hopes* on portraying an upside-down world [...] The country that

6. In one performance, the association of this scene with GDR reality was emphasized when the road manager momentarily opened the curtains to reveal a portrait of Walter Ulbricht behind the stage (Seeboldt 1983).
7. Bleib erschütterbar, doch widersteht! was nonetheless interpreted by the authorities in Cottbus as a 'call for organised resistance against the GDR'. Cottbus was the only town where the production was banned. This was later uplifted. See Kießling 1983 unpaginated.
8. Münz writes of the *commedia dell'arte*: 'The main means of effect was the grotesque comparison "whereby the most heterogeneous things were brought into relationship with each other often in surprising ways" (Münz 1979: 152). Included quotation Pirkner 1927.

had defined itself as historical advanced was, by means of illogical historical 'dualistic', in the process of re-interpreting reality. And it seemed that everything was masked just like the actors on the old video recording had masked themselves. The 'weapons of war' were called 'peace weapons', the resolution to station rockets wasn't called 'Stationing Resolution' rather 'Double Resolution' [...] Pacifism was given the mask of the 'class enemy/war opponent'.

(Wenzel 1983: unpaginated, original emphasis)

The mask traditionally possesses a dualistic symbolism. Whether the mythological figure of Hermes, the Indian trickster or the court jester, the clown figure is never static. Frequently it embodies a unity of opposites such as tragic and comic, clumsy and acrobatic, or good and evil (von Barloewen 1987: 43). This duality could be seen in the carnivalesque *commedia dell'arte* where serious and comical figures were often unified in one character – the Harlequin, for example, being renowned for his transformations. In the twentieth century this dual motif has often been mirrored in mistaken identity scenarios such as Hynkel and the Jewish Hairdresser in Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940), or Galy Gay and Jeriah Jip in Brecht's *Man Equals Man* (1926). In this duality also lies an element of utopian renewal as in the change from one state to another in carnival, e.g., from knave to king. It is therefore significant that the three main characters of the *Hammer-Revue*, the clown, the dictator and the general, all undergo metamorphoses. Menschling, the aggressive dictator, is transformed into a helpless clown when he is derided with laughter by the cast in a scene reminiscent of the ritual carnivalesque humiliation of the king (Bakhtin 1984: 197).⁶ The general, played by Dieter Beckert, displays a mixture of gallantry and madness. The latter is reflected by the skeleton puppet he carries with him. Like the mask, the puppet has a grotesque ambivalence. On one hand, it denotes a harmless doll, on the other, it reflects the general's degradation into madness and the deception behind the logic of the military world. Beckert's metamorphosis reaches its climax during his performance of Peter's Rühmkorf's 'Remain Shakeable and Resist!' When he drops his military jacket on the ground and walks off stage, he symbolically rejects the logic of the Cold War. With this, he also demonstrates how gestures and costumes can speak louder than censorable words.⁷

Wenzel's large red painted mouth is a carnivalesque symbol of death and destruction, but also rebirth (Bakhtin 1984: 317). Throughout the *Hammer-Revue* his pranks reflect the traditional rogue-like characteristics of the Harlequin. But laughter and exuberance transform into melancholy introspection when he demasks himself before singing his own 'Feinslieb, du lachst dazu' ('My love, you just laugh at it') (1982). This song, about the dying of love but also the opportunity of a new beginning, invites analogy with the stagnating socialist ideal in the GDR. With this metamorphosis Wenzel leads the audience out of carnival fervor and back into everyday reality.

Other carnivalesque techniques are used in the *Hammer-Revue* to undermine static models of thought. Absurd juxtapositions of contradictory phenomena⁸ abound, for example, the arbitrary topsy-turvy use of stage objects. This is reminiscent of the carnival, in which, as Bakhtin states, objects are 'turned inside out, utilized in the wrong way [...] Household objects are turned into arms, kitchen utensils and dishes become musical instruments' (Bakhtin 1984: 410–12). Wenzel's clarinet is used in the course of the evening as a telescope, a gun, a stick or a microphone. One scene, for example, is reminiscent of

Karl Valentin's 'The Bewitched Music Stand' (Valentin 1978: 525–534) in being an absurd slapstick constructed around a music stand. Attempting to piece the stand together Mensching clammers around Wenzel's body, ending up in an upside-down position with his legs wrapped around Wenzel's neck. This traditional clowns motif is symbolic of a world turned topsy-turvy. The 'continual rotation of the upper and lower parts suggests', according to Bakhtin, 'the rotation of earth and sky' whereby 'the buttocks persistently try [...] to take the place of the head and the head that of the buttocks' (Bakhtin 1984: 353).

In Wenzel and Mensching's subsequent production *News from the Da Da eR* (Da Da eR being a wordplay incorporating the terms DDR and Da Da) this upside-down motif supports a parody of the absurdities of GDR travel restrictions. Here the music stand is introduced as a model railway, a 'PIKO Model Railway'. The various legs and arms of the stand are given names such as 'the locomotive' and 'the adapter' to which the clowns attach conspiratorial significance: 'Get your hands off the adapter. If I catch you once more on the adapter, then I'll give you a panning!' (*News from the Da Da eR* 1983). Playing on the power of association heightened by the atmosphere of taboo – the clowns appear to be about to attempt to flee the republic! – Weh and Meh increasingly draw the audience into a game of nonsense which ends in the clowns' farcical entanglement with the music stand.

Such word games or linguistic hybrids play a frequent role in *News from the Da Da eR*. A trait of popular humour dating back to the Latin *parodia sacra*, Bakhtin describes a hybrid as 'the repulsion of the foreign-born sacred word' (Bakhtin 1981: 77). A dialogic process takes place in that two styles meet in the same word, 'the language being parodied [...] and the language that parodies' (Bakhtin 1981: 75): for example in Wenzel's reference to Mensching as his 'blooming comrade' in the song 'The Singer's Curse', which plays on the ambiguity between 'comrade' and 'Party Member'. In this way the official language is ridiculed as empty rhetoric. In the scene 'It is a special honour for me', a parody of an official prize-giving ceremony, 'Akademie' of Arts (the venue for the performance) is transformed into 'Epidemie' (epidemic) of Arts. The clowns lavish one another with ironical distinctions, stabbing each other with medals and feigning agonizing deaths. Documented on video, the audience, whose participation in such mind-numbing official ceremonies is a necessary part of professional life, roars with laughter (*News from the Da Da eR* 1983).

In the scene 'Tenor in a divided world', from August 1989, a hybrid is constructed from the ambiguity of the word 'Stimme' meaning both 'voice' and 'vote'. Wenzel has not seen his 'Stimme' since he was last at the polls – a reference to the election rigging in Dresden of that year. In an ensuing slapstick, Mensching performs an operation on Wenzel's throat, locates the voice and exclaims: 'There you are, I've got it. A typical model from the 1950s, solid in basic construction, euphoric in basic tone, a bit dirty' (Wenzel & Mensching 1991: 21). Here they are alluding to the irrelevance of the communist party leaders who still wallowed in the achievements of the construction years of the GDR in the 1950s. Exploiting the dialogic potential of a word, the clowns thus find an aesthetic solution to a political contradiction.

THE POLITICAL DIMENSION TO WENZEL AND MENSCHING'S CARNIVAL

Bakhtin's writings on laughter have also been interpreted as 'a subtle condemnation of the degeneration of the Russian Revolution into Stalinist Orthodoxy'.⁹

9. Back cover of Bakhtin (1984) *Rabelais and his World*.

10. See Karls Enkel's treatment of the theme of anarchy in Enkel 1980.
11. Despite a concerted effort by the Stasi (GDR secret police) to recruit Wenzel to inform on other band members, Wenzel held firm and avoided contact. Finally the attempt to recruit him was called off. See Robb (ed), 2007: 242. Based on Stasi report BStU MfS XV/2522/78 from 11 March 1981, p. 281.
12. *Der Kulturbund* even sponsored two of Karls Enkel's productions. This institution contained the members Wolfgang Heise and Karin Hirdina, two of Wenzel and Mensching's lecturers at the Humboldt University. Wolfgang Heise, as an 'victim of fascism' had a certain invulnerability and was able to protect them. Roger Woods writes: 'A widely acknowledged past as an anti-fascist who has suffered at the hands of the Nazis [...] inhibits the Party from taking legal action against an individual' (Woods 1986: 19).
13. This information is based on interviews with the cast as well as on articles in the pamphlet *Die Hammer-Revue-Dokumentation 1982*, unpaginated.
14. Ständer writes that the rumours that Wenzel and Mensching had complete freedom had been instigated by the Stasi. In fact: 'Both of them could point to several bans'.

Indeed, the parallels between the function of laughter at a Wenzel and Mensching concert – its critical power as well as its limitations – and in the carnivals of the Middle Ages, are at times striking. At certain officially sanctioned times of the year the medieval carnival took place. Only here was it possible to celebrate 'the people's unofficial truth' and to momentarily discard the official truth propagated by the church (Bakhtin 1984: 90). A comparable polarity existed in the GDR: the dogmas one paid lip service to in public ceased to be valid in one's own private sphere, where jokes at the shortcomings of the state were commonplace. The 'unofficial truth' was associated with laughter and mockery, and Wenzel and Mensching instinctively knew how to exploit this. As Bakhtin states, 'laughter liberates not only from external censorship but first of all from the great interior censor; it liberates from [...] fear of the sacred, of prohibitions, of the past, of power' (Bakhtin 1984: 94). The laughter at a Wenzel and Mensching concert enabled momentary release from otherwise all-powerful social taboos.

But like the carnival, it is false to assume that Karls Enkel concerts constituted a hot bed of political subversion. In carnival, the expression of utopian change – in the transformations, the grotesque images and the upside-down antics – was merely symbolic: the social hierarchy reverted to normal as soon as the carnival was over. Similarly the concerts of Karls Enkel provided an outlet for pent-up frustration in the GDR. The audience revelled in this brief divergence from the norm, not unlike the carnival, where 'for a short time life came out of its usual [...] consecrated furrows and entered the sphere of utopian freedom. The very brevity of this freedom increased its [...] utopian radicalism' (Bakhtin 1984: 89).

But while the carnival exuded a disrespectful boisterousness this did not rule out the conformity of its participants in normal life. As Bakhtin states: 'In medieval man's soul, attendance at official mass could coexist with a gay parody of truth in which a world is "turned inside out"' (Bakhtin 1984: 95). Here again lies a parallel. Outside of their artistic lives Wenzel and Mensching did not subscribe to the political opposition. Although previously refused entry to the Party because of 'anarchic tendencies' (Wenzel 1997),¹⁰ Wenzel was, from 1980, a member of the Socialist Unity Party (SED).¹¹ He believed in the reformability of socialism and that this was best achieved from working inside the system. Mensching shared this point of view:

In spite of the stagnation, one had the feeling (and that was certainly also a self-deception in terms of how it turned out) that something had to happen. That's why we stayed here. We thought we had to promote something – to laugh at the situation in order to change it or at least to ridicule it to the extreme.

(Mensching 1984b)

Protected from the censors with good references from allies in the cultural establishment¹² they were able to avoid prohibition. The *Hammer-Revue* was performed around the whole GDR¹³ only running into difficulties in Cottbus in March 1983, where a temporary ban was uplifted after the influential mediation from the Academy of Arts of the GDR and the Committee for Entertainment Arts. Wenzel and Mensching earned the tag 'Court Jesters of the GDR', envied by colleagues for their privileged status (Ständer 1997: 25).¹⁴

It was, however, also due to their aesthetic of laughter that Wenzel and Mensching achieved a 'fool's freedom'. Carnavalesque laughter, according

to Bakhtin, eluded censorship more easily than satire. It does not raise itself above the object of derision, 'it is directed at all and everyone [...] it asserts and denies, buries and revives' (Bakhtin 1984: 11–12). Bakhtin finds an example of this in the grotesque writings of the Renaissance author François Rabelais. The following recount of Rabelais' avoidance of the stake is somehow reminiscent of the contrasting fates of Wenzel and Mensching and Wolf Biermann – the latter's scathing and direct political humour having being banned in the GDR:

We must admit that Rabelais' prank in the style of Master Villon was fully successful. In spite of the frankness of his writings he [...] suffered no serious persecution [...] Rabelais' friend Dolet perished at the stake because of his statements, which although less damning had been seriously made.

(Bakhtin 1984: 268)

Wenzel's artistic motivation as a clown supports this theory. While the clownesque element of productions such as in *The Comical Tragedy of the 18th Brumaire* (1983) and *Season in Hell* (1992) were underpinned by serious political analysis, Wenzel insists that their motivations were, in the first instance, artistic and not political. As a clown he cannot afford the seriousness of politics for its own sake:

The political doesn't interest me in the first instance as a clown. For me the problem becomes political only after I've solved it aesthetically: I look for the hidden thing where the philosophical contradiction lies. And for me the philosophical always lies in the funny aspect.

(Wenzel 1994)

The carnivalesque therefore, while containing a symbolic revolutionary component, should not merely be reduced to political subversion. It is rather an aesthetic abstraction of something larger – the historic, collective will for utopian renewal. Because of its abstract, laughing nature it is usually deemed harmless or at least containable by authorities. At the same time, this is relative to the explosiveness of a given political situation. Karl Valentin, for example, whose topsy-turvy clownesque antics were initially tolerated by the Nazis, found it increasingly difficult to work in the Third Reich after his film *The Inheritance* was banned in 1936 for portraying too much 'misery'.¹⁵ Wenzel and Mensching's freedom to perform was likewise dependent on the goodwill of the authorities – the aforementioned incident in Cottbus in March 1983 being indicative of this. Six years later, during the Peaceful Revolution of autumn 1989, their fool's freedom ceased to have validity. Amidst widespread unrest surrounding the fortieth anniversary of the GDR celebrations on 7 October, the duo was arrested prior to a concert in Hoyerswerda and held in the custody of the Stasi for one night before being expelled from the region (Mensching 1994b; Ständer 1997: 25).

There are many other examples from twentieth century theatre and film where carnivalesque motifs have been used with varying degrees of politicization. The wild images of carnival in Marcel Carné's *Children of Paradise* had poignant political significance given that the film was made during Nazi-occupied France and released in 1945 to coincide with the country's liberation.

15. *Gaukler, Clowns und Komödianten. Tragikomödie im Film. Von Chaplin bis Fellini.* Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft für Jugendfilmarbeit und Medienerziehung e. V. Weekend Seminar 8–10 July, 1988 (Vogelsburg near Volkach, 1988), unpaginated.

The idea of fertility and renewal was likewise portrayed in the physical coarseness of the Parisian proletariat seated in the gods. Manfred Schneider writes: 'The cinema carnival [...] of *Children of Paradise* was at the same time an appeal to the passionate force of the people in a torn France that was occupied by enemy troops' (Schneider 1985: 11).

In Chaplin's *Great Dictator* the mistaken identity between Hynkel and the Jewish hairdresser effectively enables the latter to transform into a dictator and deliver a truly utopian speech for mankind. The role inversion – a traditional motif derived from the ritualized mask-wearing of carnival, and used in Renaissance theatre from *commedia dell'arte* to Shakespeare to reveal the discrepancy between appearance and reality – artistically facilitates the expression of an anti-Nazi statement. The comical ambivalence of Chaplin's performance, however, was resented by the Left (Tichy 1974: 104). His adoption of Nazi techniques to convey his message – the musical accompaniment of Wagner's *Lohengrin* and the oratory style – blurred the distinction between pathos and irony and invited the interpretation that he was parodying political dogma in general, whether fascist or humanist. Such ambiguity is, however, in keeping with carnivalesque ambivalence. The same contradiction provided a stumbling block for Wenzel and Mensching in their roles as Don Quixote and Sancho Pansa in their 1985 production, *Spaniards of all Lands*, on the subject of the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War. GDR dissidents in the audience, looking for a blatant anti-Stalinist stance, were disappointed by the comical but abstract dialogues on the relationship between idealism and realism. The ironical pathos of Quixote was misunderstood as a typical GDR glorification of the International Brigade (Robb 2001: 156–172).

Brecht, on the other hand, makes extensive use of carnivalesque motifs to support a clearly defined ideological message. In *The Good Person of Szechwan* (1940), for example, the motif of disguise reflects the maskedness of society. The Shen Te-Shui Ta dual configuration symbolizes the alienation of the prostitute Shen Te in the capitalist world. The gods, who are searching for evidence of the goodness of humanity, do not acknowledge this contradiction – they are only interested in appearance not reality. However, the transformation of the 'good' Shen Te into the hard and exploitative Shui Ta cannot be said to have utopian significance. The author merely adapts a carnivalesque technique for his own ends. As Richard Sheppard writes:

While Brecht is drawn to the carnivalesque ethos because of its subversive potential, he is critical of it when, deprived of a well-defined location, it overflows its proper boundaries, becomes a way of life and prevents a serious confrontation with moral and political issues.

(Sheppard 1990: 308)

THE CHRONOTOPE OF THE CLOWN

Wenzel and Mensching are very much part of a tradition of twentieth century clowning that has much in common with Brechtian alienation. The ironic ambiguity of character, the techniques of montage and disruption, the constant challenging of static perceptions of reality – these are also major features of Wenzel and Mensching's act. Indeed, described by Brecht in 1922 as 'one of the most penetratingly intellectual figures of our time' (Brecht 1967: 39),

it is the clown Karl Valentin who is often described as ‘the teacher of Bertolt Brecht’ (Schulte 1968: 126). What these men have in common is a particular attitude with regard to space and time. Valentin’s work, which has been summarized as ‘critique of a static concept of time’ (Wöhrle 1985: 50), corresponds, in some respects, to Brecht’s approach to a ‘free availability of space and time’ (Jendriek 1969: 212–213). Dieter Wöhrle writes:

In Valentin’s play with time, the present is explicitly determined in relation to the past – even here Valentin upsets the usual view of those for whom only the finished and completed can be ascertained, while the open present evades a concrete knowledge – and in this way he steers his glance precisely towards the unusual within the present.

(Wöhrle 1985: 53)

One is also reminded of Bakhtin’s theory of the carnival *chronotope*. Literally meaning ‘time-space’ (Bakhtin 1981: 425), the *chronotope* is a concept which reflects a temporal and spatial perspective of a work of art. In contrast to the static world outlook of the Middle Ages, the carnival *chronotope* was spatially universal, temporally reflective of the ‘inconclusive present’ (Bakhtin 1981: 26). Wenzel and Mensching’s aforementioned carnivalesque antics – the ambiguous hybrids and absurd dialogues – are the embodiment of such spatial and temporal transgression. As their dramaturg Heiner Maaß writes, ‘the clown [moves] into timelessness’. This is evident in their autumn 1989 production *Old News from the Da Da eR* where Weh and Meh glide from scene to scene with a perfect awareness of their *chronotope*. The GDR reality is reflected in a grotesque light and thereby relativized and made to appear as an ambivalent part of a greater universe. No longer revue sketches, this now constitutes theatre; the theme is the comical and sad disintegration of the GDR or rather an alienated, grotesque reflection of this called the ‘Da Da eR’. What Bakhtin terms the ‘small scale time’ of everyday reality is abandoned for the ‘time at large’ of carnivalesque clowns’ tradition. Bakhtin writes: ‘Only through popular culture was [the] contemporary world able to make contact with “time at large”. This popular culture gives depth and connectedness to the carnivalized images of communal scenes’. Bakhtin continues in the same essay: ‘A phenomenon belonging to small scale time may be purely negative, only hateful, but in time at large it is ambivalent and always attractive because it belongs to existence itself’ (Bakhtin 1985: 37–38).

In *Old News from the Da Da eR*, renamed *Latest from the Da Da eR* after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the scenes and songs reflect the historical turning point. With a mixture of rage, grief, relief and anticipation, the clowns and their audience lay the GDR to rest finally in a chorus of laughter. Weh and Meh constantly manipulate the perspective of the audience. They can do this since clowns have, once again in the words of Bakhtin, a ‘metaphorical significance [...] one cannot take them literally [...] they are not what they seem [...] their being coincides with their role, and outside this role they simply do not exist’ (Bakhtin 1981: 159). Weh and Meh can reflect any standpoint they choose, whether it be that of the humbled leadership, the betrayed ‘old communist’, the Stasi or Party members who have changed colours overnight, the disappointed left-wing intellectuals or the re-emerging nationalist lynch-mobs. The audience, seeing their own reflection in the parodied characters, are drawn into the unfolding comedy and tragedy of the GDR.

16. The theatre in the *Palast der Republik*. The intendant of the theatre was horrified and later told Wenzel and Mensching she was absolving herself of all responsibility for their performance.
17. Doberenz states how the audience no longer laughed at this last line after the *Politbüro* had lost its monopoly of power. The line was subsequently removed.

'Do you remember the 1980s?' is a parody of the aging leadership. Sprinkling powder on each other's hair, the clowns simulate two old men who reminisce on a glorious past. It emerges, however, that neither can remember the 1980s. Weh has an idea: 'Weren't you the ancient state security general who celebrated his 80th birthday in the 1980s? [...]' (Wenzel & Mensching 1991: 21). This reference to the hated and much feared Stasi chief Erich Mielke was extremely risky, all the more so as this scene was first performed on 11 August 1989 in the theatre in the Palace of the Republic, the GDR government building.¹⁶ The scene continues with further jibes at the undemocratically elected *Politbüro*:

Weh: [...] Then [in the 1980s] all words that started with 'pol' were forbidden.

Meh: Police were allowed.

Weh: That's an exception that confirms the rules, like the *Politbüro*.

(Wenzel & Mensching 1991: 30)¹⁷

The clowns continue to relentlessly lampoon the GDR political hierarchy. With ironical self-pity they sing of the personal tragedy unfolding: 'I never ceased to toil for my state/Ruled partially day and night/Now I'm old and have reaped a fine mess/They laugh at me on the scrap heap/It's my own fault – that's what I get/Never expect thanks for anything' (Wenzel & Mensching 1991: 30). In December 1989 a new song 'You shouldn't wake dead dogs' was added to satirize the new opportunism of the Stasi turncoats who have destroyed all trace of their crimes. With gay abandon, the clowns dance in the style of Rumpelstilzchen singing: 'Take the discs and the German mark/Come lets burn the files in the park' (Wenzel & Mensching 1991: 31–32).

After the fall of the Wall the mood of euphoria began to change. By January 1990 the Peaceful Revolution, originally led by artists and intellectuals demanding change within socialism, was overtaken by the population at large. The scene 'The clowns deserve to be shot' was added to reflect this new twist. Wenzel and Mensching feeling themselves, alongside other members of the GDR cultural elite, accused of intellectual collaboration with the old order, ironically offer themselves up to the audience for execution. In a typically carnivalesque inversion, the clowns turn a situation upside down to reveal its absurdity: in doing so inviting contemplation on the mood of revenge which dominates the media (1991: 53–54). In the film *Latest from the Da Da eR* this scene is expanded: an entrance-paying crowd in carnival attire storms the prison where Weh and Meh live. With whipped-up emotions the mob pursue the clowns through the streets shouting 'Hang them up!' Reminiscent of Oskar Matzerath in Günter Grass's novel *The Tin Drum* (1959) they flee to Paris but are unable to escape the clutches of an invisible authority. Howling like abandoned dogs, they reflect how the master-servant relationship, unresolved in the communist era, is still valid today. But there was now a twist: on the threshold to a new era and political system in 1990 Weh and Meh were back where they started as the court jesters, but now in a system that perceived no need for them.

THE CLOWNS AS THE ETERNAL LOSERS

The utopian aspect of Wenzel and Mensching's clowning had always been abstractly linked to the idea of a reformable socialism. Now abandoned to a

capitalist fate, the clowns cut rather sorry figures. Karin and Heinz Hirdina remarked: 'Wenzel and Mensching now sing differently about distant climes, the pain is conclusive, there is no longer an alternative' (Hirdina, Heinz and Karin 1991: 53). With the dashing of this option, Weh and Meh symbolically banish themselves to a surreal underworld. In the Rimbaud inspired *Season in Hell* from 1992 they attempted to come to terms aesthetically and philosophically with the new times.

For Wenzel, Rimbaud was the poetic expression of a man on the fringes of society, a situation which Wenzel could identify with in the early 1990s in unified Germany: 'It was as if one had died and then woken up in a different part of the world, the part of the minority, of the losers' (Wenzel 1997). The clowns sing of how the world is divided into two artificial groups: the winners and the losers: 'It's a lost man/who can dance in the skin of the winners' (Wenzel & Mensching 1992). Taken from a poem dedicated to Rimbaud in Mensching's *Berlin Elegies* (Mensching 1995: 49), these lines express identification with the French poet who in *Une Saison en Enfer/Season in Hell* rejected the victor mentality of the western world. In interview Wenzel spoke of the suppression of the emotional, feminine side of people, what he termed 'the masculinization of society' (Wenzel 1992). In this respect *Season in Hell* represents a symbolic search for these values of the 'others', the non-victors, which from the outset appears doomed to fail.

In the 'Briefcase scene' the clowns enact a bitter master-servant conflict. This is an aesthetic abstraction of the servile situation in which many east Germans found themselves in the early 1990s as their country was literally annexed by West Germany, to whose laws and system they now had to adapt. In this scene as soon as Meh submits himself to Weh's psychological power game, he is condemned to lose, because Weh determines the rules:

Weh: You have to open the briefcase.

Meh: But I don't have a briefcase.

Weh: Open it, I tell you.

Meh: OK, I'll open the briefcase which I don't have. And then?

Weh: Take out the blood.

Meh: What blood?

Weh: Do what I tell you.

Meh: I can't find any blood in the case that I don't have.

Weh: What's in your case then?

(Wenzel & Mensching 1992)

A few scenes later this dialogue recommences:

Weh: What's in your case then?

Meh: First you open your case then I'll tell you what's in mine.

Weh: OK, then I'll open my briefcase.

Meh: What do you see?

Weh: A hell!

Meh: Close your case immediately – I don't want a hell.

Weh: If you give me the blood, I'll close the case with the hell.

(Wenzel & Mensching 1992)

Step for step Meh gambles all of his cards, convinced that he is reaching a compromise with his adversary. As Wenzel explained: 'Beyond reality

18. Program pamphlet for
Aufenthalt in der Hölle.

a conflict is enacted that actually takes place in reality' (Wenzel 1997). The image of dependence is reinforced by the choreographed physical interaction which seems subservient to a mathematical logic. The scene exudes a sinister tension which underlies the whole production. There is no comical carnivalesque resolution. In an open condemnation of so-called democratic western society Weh and Meh conclude: 'This poetry of life is simply not CAPABLE OF WINNING A MAJORITY!' (Wenzel & Mensching 1992).

What has become of the laughing clowns? The direct political criticism shows how Wenzel and Mensching's clown's aesthetic has changed since the GDR days. Hinting at the crisis which looms for the clowns, the programme for *Season in Hell* reads: 'At the end of their ODYSSEY, on streets of concrete in quiet surroundings the smile of the clown freezes to a grimace: TWO UNEMPLOYED RIDERS OF THE APOCALYPSE who drum themselves into the darkness of history'.¹⁸ Weh and Meh do indeed seem effectively unemployed. The above quotation is reminiscent of Heinrich Böll's character Hans Schnier in *The Clown*, who, financially and emotionally bankrupt, turns to begging because the new west German society of the 'economic miracle' cannot deal with the concept of 'the loser'. Weh and Meh are similarly torn. In the GDR, the collective laughter had been the acknowledgment of a common plight. Now, Wenzel believed, the audiences were not interested in witnessing the reflection of their own shortcomings – they just come to be entertained. But quoting from Brecht's *Fatzer*, Wenzel stressed that he saw contemporary western civilization as a 'loser' culture:

'From now on and for a good while/
There will be no more winners/
In your world, but rather only/
the conquered'. We have to admit that
to ourselves and then this clowning might have a point again [...] The
clowns are dead. It's a long process [...] But at the moment it is unclear
where it is going.

(Wenzel 1994; Brecht 1978: 116)

Despite the absence of laughter Wenzel and Mensching do find a poetic resolution to the conflict in *Season in Hell*. The so-called 'winners' are reduced to clowns who unite with all the 'losers' of the world singing: 'In the end the nutcases and the brain boxes unite/ As losers on the side of the victors' (Wenzel & Mensching 1992).

Throughout the 1990s and up until they ceased to perform together in 2001, Wenzel and Mensching continued to fill small theatres all around east Germany. They still generated controversy: in 1994 they were sacked from their regular cabaret slot on the SAT1 TV show because the scene 'Sperm Donation for the Pope' was judged as an 'offence towards religious feelings' (Wenzel 1994; Ständer 1997: 25). None the less, the cult status which they and other political performers enjoyed in the 1980s in the GDR had subsided. Their role to provide an outlet for the critical intelligentsia in the GDR no longer applied. It is questionable to what extent this grouping, while empathizing with Weh and Meh's depiction of the 'Ossi-Wessi' (East-West) conflict, still identified with the clown's 'view from below'. For those interested in the perspective of the 'other', however, the carnivalesque continued to be valid.

The challenge for the clowns Weh and Meh in the 1990s lay in their combining of their traditional clownesque techniques and the new political

directness made possible by the ending of censorship. Mensching observed in interview with Doberenz in 1991:

In the past we were forced into using the fool's costume because it was only within this role that we could express certain things. Now that you can say things in different ways there's much more voluntariness involved so that now we've been released from the situation of the court jester. I believe the point has now come where the faces that we actually tried to hide behind the make-up now come to the fore again producing a bizarre polarity of mask and person.

(Wenzel & Mensching 1991: 140–144)

Exploiting this polarity, the clown can use his trump card of alienation, which Heiner Maaß describes as 'reversing the mirror of contemplation' (Maaß 1991a: 67). A classic example of this can be found in *Christmas in Africa* from 1994. The prodigal son (Weh) returns home where his mother (Meh) leads a proud homeless existence under a bridge. With a grotesque reversal of logic the mother rejects her son because he has squandered *his* life: 'Your father is so disappointed in you'. After an extended dialogue the son eventually replies pleadingly: 'But mummy, it's not that bad being the Federal President!'¹⁹ The inversion of the angle of vision casts a relativizing light on the issue of winners and losers in the Germany of the 1990s. The political statement is clear, nevertheless Wenzel remains the timeless clown Weh with the comical, carnivalesque aspect. By transforming into the 'Federal President' the clown shows that he is still, as Heiner Maaß states, 'the embodiment of a vision of utopia [...] from which the endless joy of life shines' (Maaß 1991b: 155).

This article has traced the development of the Wenzel and Mensching political clowning act from the early 1980s in the GDR through to the 1990s in united Germany. It has attempted to show how, in the taboo-ridden public arena of the GDR, their grotesque *mise-en-scène* – the hybridic wordplays combined with the costumes and masks and physical slapstick – created a surreal clowns' time and space, giving them the status of court jesters and protecting them (to a certain degree) from censorship.²⁰ During and after the transformation to capitalist society Wenzel and Mensching continued to play to audiences, locating and parodying the character traits emerging in the new society in which the biggest taboo was the acknowledgement of failure.

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19. This quotation is a transcript from the live revue *Weihnachten in Afrika* in 1994. The published text differs slightly, see 'Rückkehr des verlorenen Sohnes' (1999), pp. 114–117.
20. To read more about the Stasi (secret police) observation of Wenzel and Mensching see David Robb, 'Political Song in the GDR: The Cat- and -Mouse Game with Censorship and Institutions', in Robb (ed.) 2007: 227–254.

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