



The Aesthetics of Humour in a Theatre of Civil Strife

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Pour citer cet article

Fuchs Anne, « The Aesthetics of Humour in a Theatre of Civil Strife », *Cycnos*, vol. 24.2 (Éclats d'Afrique du Sud/South African Literature), 2007, mis en ligne en 2021.

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Cycnos, études anglophones

revue électronique éditée sur épi-Revel à Nice

ISSN 1765-3118 ISSN papier 0992-1893

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EPI-REVEL

Revue électronique de l'Université Côte d'Azur

The Aesthetics of Humour in a Theatre of Civil Strife

Anne Fuchs*

André Viola fit partie de mon jury de soutenance de thèse et à cette occasion je pus apprécier son aptitude tout à fait exceptionnelle de critique rigoureux et de pédagogue. Quant à son humour, j'ai le souvenir de nombreux colloques (car avec Jacqueline Bardolph nous fûmes membres des mêmes associations anglicistes et post-colonialistes) où ses apartés spirituels faisaient les délices des uns et des autres lors de quelques après-midi sombres à Barcelone ou à Tübingen, en attendant les différentes interventions sur l'Afrique du Sud qui concernaient autant André que moi. Il nous manque cruellement et pas seulement à Nice. André s'intéressa surtout à la fiction et moi au théâtre, mais cette passion commune pour le pays de l'apartheid me permet de lui adresser ce petit traité d'esthétique ainsi qu'un dernier Amandla!

A post-colonial background to any kind of theatre presupposes at some level a degree of civil strife. In the aftermath of independence, conflict may arise between settler and indigenous communities as can be illustrated by the two South African plays we have chosen to comment on. Within indigenous communities themselves, with the transfer of power to former post-colonial subalterns, strife, as Wole Soyinka represented as early as 1960 in *A Dance of the Forests*,¹ existed and still exists. The British-Asian play *Hijra* stems equally from another aspect of the post-colonial situation, where culture shocks and conflicts are played out in both Bombay and England among the Indian community. Ireland was the first English colony (and will probably be the last) and although *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* is very firmly situated in the Republic of Ireland, the background is still that of the British presence in the North. *Curl up and Dye, Daddy, I've seen this piece six times before and I still don't know why they are hurting each other*

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¹ Soyinka, Wole, *A Dance of the Forests*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963.

(which will from now on be referred to as *Daddy*), *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* and *Hijra*² all express their different and multicultural themes of strife in English. While this allows us to compare and contrast their use of verbal humour, the main sources of humour pertaining to these post-colonial spectacles may be found to derive just as much from visual and gestural effects.

Although most accounts of humour over the last decade commendably all begin with trying to define “why we laugh” (and we shall eventually explore this route), it will first be necessary to look at the dramatic structure of the plays and to ascertain what makes them a comedy at all. *Curl up and Dye* by Susan Pam-Grant by virtue of its title suggests in advance to the South African spectator that the play is a comedy, or even a political satire, as it is in direct line from P. W. Botha’s election statement in 1981 that the country must “Adapt or Die”. This slogan was immediately transformed by satirist Pieter-Dirk Uys to *Adapt or Dye* (D-Y-E) and in 1989 used by Pam-Grant to describe the situation in a Johannesburg hair-dressing salon *Curl up and Dye*. Apart from the obvious allusion this title is also a play on words with, it may be suggested, some significance for the actual structure of the play. Indeed the two “poor white” women characters may be considered as the subjects of a quest for stability in conflict with the two black women’s quest for change. Most important, the situation from beginning to end will remain static, there will be no comic licence accorded and revoked in the great comedic tradition, no rebirth or new life with obstacles overcome. In the years which immediately preceded the fall of Apartheid, the inhabitants of one of the new grey areas of Johannesburg reflected the hopelessness of the times, they could only “Curl up and Dye”. This static structure is of course that of the sit-com and the title is a caustic comment on the spectators’ and actors’ real world portrayed by the fictitious world of the play. The latter contains allusions to American sit-coms and betrays the influence of television, and television sit-com form. (It may be noted that other South African playwrights such as Paul Slabolepszy and Fatima Dike³ have used the same references and the same form).

When writing for a popular stage audience, some white and even black authors have chosen a structure already familiar and accepted by the

² The four plays under scrutiny: Pam-Grant, Susan, *Curl up and Dye*, first performed 1989, see Gray, Stephen (ed.), *South African Plays*, London and South Africa : Nick Hern Books and Heinemann-Centaur, 1993 ; Kotak, Ash, *Hijra*, London: Oberon Books, 2000, first performed 2000 ; Orlin, Robyn, *Daddy, I’ve seen this piece six times before and I still don’t know why they’re hurting each other*, first performed 2000, and McDonagh, Martin, *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, London: Methuen, 2001, first performed 2001.

³ See Slabolepszy, Paul, *Smallholding* in Paul Slabolepszy, *Mooi Street and other moves*, Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1994, and Dike, Fatima, *So What’s New? in Four Plays*, ed. Zakes Mda, Florida Hills: Vivlia, 1996.

millions who watch television, while the author-choreographer and devisers of *Daddy*, more than a decade later than *Curl up and Dye*, chose a form most certainly influenced by American and European post-modernist artefacts. In South Africa this has marked them out together with other artists such as William Kentridge⁴ as elitist. In Europe, these elitists have, to some degree, taken the place of the former anti-apartheid South African troupes ; they manage to express the problems of the new century in South Africa in terms which a sophisticated audience in Europe is at the same time familiar with and finds exotic. The choreographer Robyn Orlin and her company of two white and four-black actor-dancers produced an entertainment which was purely metatheatrical in the sense that the only fable to be worked out is that of how to produce an entertainment. Curiously, a comic licence is accorded at the beginning by the unexpected absence of the choreographer supposed to direct the work. This traditional comic-licence ploy is reinforced by another strong item of dramatic structure, that of the main subjects' actantial quest, in this instance the quest for control or for survival by Robyn Orlin's assistant, obliged to take over the direction of a show without a choreographer. Fragmentation, the association of the old with the new, but above all references to codes established by late twentieth-century directors such as Kantor and Schechner, create a post-modern aesthetic. Keir Elam speaks of Kantor's appearances in his own productions as a marginal controlling influence "rendering explicit (and textual) [his] role as source";⁵ Robyn Orlin of course does the opposite: it is the continuous assertion of her absence which indicates her role as source. The anti-illusion techniques are also very much to the fore with a standing audience who move at will around a raised stage upon which they are called to participate and dance with the actors; actors doubling as stage-hands and lighting technicians cross back and forth between real and fictitious worlds. A new slant on the twentieth century use of cyclorama, film or video to complement stage action is gradually revealed when the audience realise they have a choice between watching real-life actors, or raising their eyes to one of the four corner television screens, recording and showing exactly the same scene as below.

With mixed black and white casts, these first two plays might be deemed multicultural but as with many South African companies, during and after apartheid, authors and directors are of white settler origin. *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* by Martin McDonagh and *Hijra* by Ash Kotak have authors of indigenous although no longer subaltern (being Indian and Irish)

⁴ Plays by William Kentridge as author, director or adapter include *Woyzeck on the Highveld* (1992), *Ubu and the Truth Commission* (1998) and *The Conscience of Zeno* (2001).

⁵ Elam, Keir, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, London and New York : Routledge, 1988 [1st ed. Methuen, 1980], 43.

status and American and British directors⁶ respectively. *The Lieutenant* has a classical comedy structure, and a comic licence accorded by the discovery of a dead black cat with a mistaken identity. At the end of the play the comic licence is revoked with the revelation of the real identity of the cat, and therefore allows a possible return to normal for the two main protagonists. The latter are a couple of friends in the tradition of Beckett or Pinter, eating, drinking and sleeping on stage and talking endlessly in true Irish style. The actantial structure, however, is not that of *Waiting for Godot* but, strange as this may seem, similar to the structure of *Daddy*, whose subject desires to maintain control. The comedy of black humour results in both plays from the fact that all other actants are adversaries trying to trip up the protagonists, consciously or unconsciously, through their (the adversaries') desires, ruled by Eros or Thanatos.

The Lieutenant might be considered as a satirical deconstruction of the comic licence structure for, as we shall point out, the humour becomes so dark that even if the protagonists return to normal at the end, it is difficult for the spectator to do so. *Hijra*, the title of which refers to the traditional Hindu cross-dressers and entertainers supposed to be able to grant wishes and cast spells, constitutes a gender displacement of the ancient comedic structure of young man meeting girl and overcoming the old man-father figure obstacle. In the case of *Hijra*, the homosexual subject falls in love with the adopted son of a hijra, and has to overcome, in a second gender displacement, the obstacle of his mother and her friends who want to marry him off to one of the friend's daughters ; the heterosexual male makes no appearance as subject, object, adjuvant or adversary.

Comedy and humour in the theatre cannot be analysed and defined uniquely according to the structure of a play or the relationship between the protagonists and the action; what remains in the spectator's mind at the end of the play are those elementary psychic forces suddenly released : taboos are broken, the unspeakable is spoken, language conventions are discarded, and the spectator feels relief from his inhibitions and the rule of logic — and laughs. In each of the four plays under discussion, the combination of these techniques produces a different kind of humour, but equally important is the way in which author-directors use the various theatrical codes of pictorial, body or verbal language, for comic effect. Gestural and visual effects are noticeably low-key in *Curl up and Dye* : the stage-setting is mundane and typical of the poor-white life-style of Johannesburg. The action on stage is confined to the run-of-the-day gestures to be encountered in a hair-dressing salon ; the only body action to be foregrounded is the collapse in a coma of the drug-addict prostitute character — hardly a moment of hilarity. However, as indicated by the play on words of the title, the humour is

⁶ Wilson Milam (*The Lieutenant*) and Ian Brown (*Hijra*).

conveyed essentially through verbal language. To start with, there is the important factor of the mixture of different South African brands of English, with occasional bursts of an African language mingled with Afrikaans expressions from the two Black characters. To a spectator accustomed to Standard English, whether South African, European or American, the poor-white dialect of hairdresser Rolene and her client Mrs Dubois is comprehensible, if surprising, whereas Charmaine, Rolene's streetwise friend, often uses expressions even her friends can't understand. This undermining of the English language becomes itself a source of humour with the characteristic malapropisms of Mrs Dubois. When Rolene says "my TV's gone" (95), Mrs Dubois asks "On the blank?" A "surrogate mother" becomes a "subjugate granny" (126), and again she asks "For how much longer is she going to pull the wool over your ears?" (128). When Rolene offends her at the end of the play by listening to the black nurse, Dudu, rather than her, Mrs Dubois exclaims "Well this finally eats the cake" (138). Breaking of social taboos by sexual innuendo, and by the incongruity of violent and racist attitudes associated with trivial details is conveyed once again through verbal language. Four out of the five women discussing their machist partners constantly break sexual taboos, generally through the ambiguity of their remarks which the spectator and often the other characters easily comprehend. Dudu sets off a whole sequence with "Oh, my husband bought me roses, but when you know he's poking them into five other holes, you just want to tell him to stick that rose." Mrs Dubois: "Rolene, you must give us your recipe, man." Rolene: "Ag, it's simple, just tender loving care." Dudu: "In my book that one turned out a flop. Just burn that recipe." Mrs Dubois: "Well obviously my oven wasn't hot enough." Rolene: "Hot enough for what?" Dudu: "For the cake to rise." Rolene (after a pause): "Oh, ja. ... the cake to rise. (They laugh)" (120). As for violence, Rolene complains about her lack of customers: "They come for a haircut they get their throat cut" and Mrs Dubois's response to whether she has seen a woman thrown out of the window is: "No! I missed that one — all I saw was the dent in the pavement" (123).

In stark contrast a decade later, bodily presence and movement dominate *Daddy* as might be expected from the dance-theatre of the choreographer Robyn Orlin. Verbal language is often almost embarrassingly poor, and if psychic release occurs it is essentially because the assistant-director in the fictional world is unable to control the theatrical situation through language: his orders are never obeyed. This in itself is comic perhaps, but even more so are the resulting physical chases around the stage in the manner of slap-stick. The initial situation of the play is present on the stage through a body metaphor before the spectator even enters the venue. An elegant black woman is standing with statuesque immobility in the centre of the stage balancing on her head a clay dove. The title: *Daddy, I've seen this piece six times before and I still don't understand why they're*

hurting each other does not encourage a univocal, unilateral interpretation but the statue may represent the apartheid regime in all its static splendour, with a dove of peace kept in place by the absence of movement. The dove eventually falls to the floor and breaks as the woman begins to remove layer upon layer of dresses, or perhaps the layers of apartheid laws and prejudices. Freedom ensues or is it chaos? A mad white woman ballet dancer stumbles around trying to find her place in this new society, black stagehands and dancers do their own thing, including a beautiful solo performance to the music of *Swan Lake*; Gerard, the white assistant-director has a cross-dressing number and is later sexually assaulted on stage by a large black lady he has (fictitiously) chosen from the audience to dance with. The large black lady takes over at the end, but the lasting impression is that of the chaos resulting from the breaking of racist taboos. One cannot help thinking of Herbert Blau's definition⁷ of the postmodern performance:

in the fantasy text of the postmodern — at the dead end of representation or the possible death of the social — there is still the living image of the participatory spectacle itself, the carnival or the festival, where the dismembered body politic would be transformed from an amorphous silent mass into the vociferous equity of the crowd." (89)

The dismembered body politic turns into the actual dismembering of bodies in *The Lieutenant*, which has more to do with Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty or even the Gothic effects of Grand Guignol. It certainly goes way beyond carnival or the breaking of taboos in the other plays. Struggles between the Irish paramilitaries give one horrific torture scene and are responsible for the chopping up of the three bodies of Northern Irish members of the National Liberation Army by the main protagonists, on a stage representing a cottage living-room now weltering in blood. It is the exaggeration implied by the addition of bodies, headless cats, shooting, blinding and torturing, which makes the audience laugh, but at the same time they are laughing on the wrong side of their faces, having in mind the Irish situation in April 2001 and the terrible words pronounced by Davey near the end of the play: "Oh, will it ever end? Will it never fecking end?" Donny: "It fecking won't, do you know!" (67) If the visual horror is made bearable to a certain extent through its magnification, the incongruity of the dialogue, completely at odds with what he sees, often allows the spectator to continue watching (it may be noted that some spectators actually leave). This incongruity is present throughout and the play starts with Donny and Davey: "Do you think he's dead, Donny?" Pause. Donny picks up the limp dead cat. Bits of its brain plop out. Donny looks across at Davey and puts the cat back down again. Donny: "Aye". Davey: "He might be in a coma.

⁷ Blau, Herbert, *To All Appearances. Ideology and Performance*, New York and London: Routledge, 1992, p. 89.

Would we ring the vet?" Donny : "It's more than a vet this poor feck needs." Davey: "If he gave him an injection?" (3) and so on. The torture scene where mad Padraic, Donny's son, has just removed the toenails of James, the drug-dealer, who is hanging upside down from the ceiling, is particularly rich. Padraic: "James Hanley, don't keep going on about your stupid fucking toenails! ... They were small. You'd hardly notice them gone. And if it was so concerned you were about the health of them toenails it would've been once in a while you cleaned out the muck from under them." James: "Well, you've saved me that job for good now anyways" (11).

Hijra is very much concerned with the representation of the body on stage, and with the body's ambiguity through the sex-changes and homosexuality of the protagonists, not to mention the ever-present "hijra" characters themselves, certainly cross-dressers and, from one allusion (19) most probably eunuchs. However, even if this subversion of gender values means the breaking of sexual taboos, both in the Indian world of Bombay during the first act and, then, in the British environment of Wimbledon in the second, the theme is treated on the whole with seriousness, and it is only in Scene 5 of the second Act that the visual impact becomes comic. Raj, alias Rani and his companion Nils, are receiving the visit of Nils's mother, Madhu, and the latter's friend, Mrs Patel. Although Raj for the benefit of the two ladies is dressed as a woman, he cannot control his false breasts and still has the body language of a man: "Raj sits down legs wide apart. Nils moves towards him, puts his hand on Raj's knee and draws his legs together. Raj crosses his legs and corrects his posture and his bosom. Nils sneezes. Raj's bosom drops. Nils corrects it. Madhu sees, is shocked but ignores it" (62). In the last but one scene of the play, Nils himself dresses in drag in front of Raj and the three middle-aged women matchmakers, and to the question: "Who do they think they are?" replies: "We're lesbians" (85).

Verbal language in the *Hijra* is less of a mixture of languages than in *Curl up and Dye*, although some Gujarati expressions are used. The specific characteristics of Indian immigrants are rather conveyed on stage through accent and a certain sharpness of tone which British television viewers have become used to in such series as *Goodness Gracious Me*. Humour is often the result of deliberate joke-making by the characters, in particular by the women matchmakers. "Aunty", as she is known, complains of the shamelessness of Bombay girls who have spent time in the States : "Money and education is no substitute for a good family background. Her background bankrupt completely. Totally Westernized. I blame her parents, they were too liberal. Don't know ABC about anything and end up becoming ABCDs." Aunty and Madhu laugh. Nils: "American born confused desis. Yawn." Madhu : "Ha. ABCDs. EFG." Nils: "Eh?" Madhu: "American born confused desis emigrated from Gujarat" (13). Jokes can also have heavily connotated sexual innuendoes. The last cited conversation

continues with Auntie saying: "You know I heard they put things in the coc, the American coc." Madhu is confused and embarrassed. Nils: "Coke." Auntie: "Yes coc — What is wrong with our own Indian coc ? It's cheaper and much better and made in India" (14). When Bobby (seemingly a bisexual himself) addresses the homosexual couple he says: "You jammy buggers or should that be buggerers?" (48)

While underlining the unusually strong breaking of sexual taboos in the play, these quotations are also examples of what various critics have called the superiority theory, or humour with a target. The different power groups in each of the plays use a form of disparagement to establish, or re-establish, their superiority over rival groups. The situation in the two South African plays is from this point of view complicated in the extreme. Susan Pam-Grant, the author, and Lucille Gillwald, the director, of *Curl up and Dye* were both South African liberal, bourgeois white women who (together with their mixed origin cast) created a theatrical text where, seemingly, humour is used to satirize both the oppressing and the oppressed groups of apartheid society or, in other words, the whites and the blacks. Mrs Dubois is the epitome of Afrikaner racism: about the Blacks, she declares: "Ag it will still take a thousand years to still educate that bunch" (86); Rolene, the hairdresser, is full of complaints about the Blacks who have moved into her building and tells Miriam, her black assistant: "Shut your bladdy mouth! What you think this salon is — a bladdy kaffir bus" (36). Dudu, the black customer, is also presented as a stereotype of the new educated Black, anxious to get away from her roots. Dudu says "Working at Bara is like milking into a bucket with holes. This Park Lane 'Hotel' of mine with its five star customers and its five star doctors — I take home five star pay" (116). In other words, she works as a nurse in a clinic for whites, rather than at the Baragwanath Hospital in Soweto which is short of nurses. There is even implicit criticism of Miriam who doesn't like Dudu attacking Mrs Dubois, to which Dudu retorts: "[...] it's because of your type that we'll always be slaves" (136). However, detailed analysis of the play reveals that the racist remarks are often not made humorously, but with cold-blooded aggressivity, and that the two groups who are attacked through verbal humour are, first, the poor whites for their ignorance : Rolene says "Ag yere, Miriam, but sometimes you can be real stupid. A Hamlet [the reference is to the play] is a ... a small piece of ham — simple" (101). The second group, as we have already seen, is that of men in general. It is as if verbal humour in the play is used to soften criticism ; the ignorance of poor whites and the bad behaviour of men can be excused. Racism is condemned, not through words, but through a comic reversal of situation: it is not the Blacks in Rolene's building who annoy her with their screams and domestic violence, but Dudu, the upper class Black nurse, who can hear from her apartment Rolene's own troubled family, and who attempts unsuccessfully to help her. If we consider the author and director as sources of the play, there is only

one self-deprecating humorous remark when Miriam says: "You are like these women who are fixing things for us, but you are making it worse" (136).

On the contrary, self-deprecation, post-apartheid and a decade later, is much to the fore in *Daddy* where the white assistant-director, Gerard, is shown as the white victim of black unruliness. No longer in a situation where whites can afford to be racist, the bumbling Gerard, muttering about "the rainbow nation" and "all pulling together", and the clumsy, uncomprehending white woman, constitute gently comic stereotypes of Robyn Orlin's own diminished power group. But once again there is a feminist perspective with men, black or white, rather ineffectual, and eventually with one black woman defeating and taking over from Gerard. The latter, incidentally, in his efforts to integrate the new power group, is even prepared to dress and dance with the group of black performers, all jostling for position.

In contrast, the Irish and Indian sources of *The Lieutenant* and *Hijra* are no longer really concerned with their former colonial masters. Ireland, for a start, is considered as a whole, and the butt of humour is the Irish people in general, with a constant exchange of jokes made at each other's expense. Martin McDonagh, the English-born child of Irish parents, has chosen to portray two marginal groups who have broken away from the IRA to continue a chaotic struggle in the North. What is perhaps significant is that the author himself is writing from a situation of power as an English immigrant, making fun of the English stereotypes of Irishness. The civil strife in Northern Ireland, however, well and truly exists; even though the humour may be stereotypical from an English point of view, there is nevertheless the black comedy which results from "ordinary" people terrified by the power of the freedom fighters, and in the end managing to survive, in a reversal of situation, transferring the power back to themselves.

Ash Kotak, also born in England, might have treated in the same way civil strife in Gujarat, but if there are few references to the British in *Hijra* there is only one to the Muslim community, and the play is firmly rooted in Hindu emigrant society, either on a visit back to Bombay or residing in London. All Martin McDonagh's best-known plays are situated in Ireland; Ash Kotak on the other hand is obviously inspired by his own experience as an immigrant, and the strife in his play is that between the generations, the old and the new, the traditional and the modern. The main case is made for the young and the modern, although traditionalist Aunty (in the quotations previously given) makes fun of the American dream of Indian would-be immigrants. The power struggle is between the young who want to be free to express their sexuality as they please, and the older generation still in favour of arranged marriages between "suitable" heterosexual partners. The theme of the hijra which gives added zest to the highly-sexed atmosphere of the

play also partakes of the tradition-versus-modern struggle. The Guru Hijra, who has adopted Raj, is torn between the respectable Hindu traditions of the hijra which he himself explains and the financial necessity of meeting the modern demands for “lewd, crude and rude” dancing girls. He is also willing to stretch the point as far as alcohol is concerned ; in front of the Hindu God Rama, Guru says (whispering) “Have a watercolour drink, gin and tonic. We don’t like to drink too obviously in front of Lord Rama on his birthday. It’s not very polite. Go and ask Rani to bring us some water-colour. She mixes a smashing G & T” (33). If Raj and Nils manage to solve their problems and look forward to living in England as a modern homosexual couple, we are led to believe that this is partly through the supernatural help of the Guru Hijra, that is of tradition. *Hijra* is out of the four comedies the one where the power struggles in society are best resolved.

This post-colonial theatre of civil strife obviously uses humour and specific forms of humour for a definite purpose. We should like to suggest that this purpose is linked to the fragile sense of identity which settler, indigenous and immigrant populations are trying to create or cling to. On the one hand, this coincides with the recent developments of dance drama and the importance accorded the body in all contemporary theatre ; on the other, it is conveyed through the richness of verbal language of the new brands of English, associated with post-colonial literature and performance in general. As we have seen, in three of the plays, humour has been used to subvert standard body language and to shock the spectator into an awareness of the changed society in South Africa, of the continuing violence in Ireland, and of the problems of marriage and sex in the British-Asian immigrant community. Dialectal language or “new” English is itself a source of humour, but more so is the breaking of taboos and, finally, the disparagement, which may often be self-deprecating, of various power groups. The underlying quest for survival in all four plays is a realization that the survival of a group depends on the changing sense of self, and also, as Elaine Aston cites Prathiba Parmar as saying, on “a self that is rooted in particular histories, cultures and languages.”⁸ It is not forbidden to think that cultural diversity may be a source of humour.



⁸ Aston, Elaine, *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre*, London and New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 91. Aston cites Prathiba Parmar’s article “Other kinds of Dreams” in *Feminist Review* 31, 1989, p. 58.