

## NEWS IN BRIEF

### 27TH INTERNATIONAL HUMOUR CONFERENCE AT HOLY NAMES UNIVERSITY, OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA, JUNE 29 – JULY 3, 2015

In the summer of 2015, an international conference on humour studies took place at Holy Names University, where Professor Martin Lampert from the Department of Psychology, the long-serving secretary of the International Society for Humor Studies (ISHS), invited humour scholars from all over the world to hold their 27th annual meeting. This year, the conference featured more than 150 presentations, workshops, and performances from scholars and professionals representing 26 countries. The dense programme was generally targeted at five areas: 1) cognition and creativity; 2) culture, gender, and community; 3) health and well-being; 4) individuals and individual styles; and 5) public and private discourse. In addition to that, there were five panels / general sessions, sponsored symposia by renowned associations and societies dealing with humour, some roundtables (e.g. teaching humour studies at university), workshops, and plenty of extracurricular activities.

The general sessions, the first of which dealt with judiciary humour, featured Christie Davies (University of Reading, UK), Marc Galanter (University of Wisconsin Law School, US), and attorney Pamela Hobbs (US). The discussion touched upon the uses of humour in courts, especially from a cross-cultural perspective, with examples given mostly from the court practices of Great Britain and the United States. The last speaker, Dr Hobbs, pointed out that quite often the use of humour is connected with illustrating a thought to elucidate a law, as humour has the ability to make explanations more memorable and digestible, even if at the same time it makes them more ambiguous. Another thought-provoking general session was on cross-cultural perspectives on women in stand-up comedy, chaired by Sharon Lockyer (Centre for Comedy Studies Research, Brunel University, UK), held on the third day of the conference. It started with a presentation from Dr Lockyer and continued with an overview of women comedians from around the world, as the other speakers talked about women's stand-up in Japan (Kimi Oshima, Kanagawa University) and the United States (Regina Barreca, University of Connecticut). Generally, it can be said that in recent years the Western stand-up comedy scene features more female comedians than before and this trend is rising. The same goes for female *rakugo* performers in Japan (*rakugo* being a tradition of comic storytelling in which the performer sits on the stage and acts out a humorous narrative (quite often in dialogic format) without any other props than just a paper fan and a small cloth). Yet another very successful general session was on cognitive science, chaired by Graeme Richie (University of Aberdeen, UK). The first presenter, Seana Coulson (University of California, US) suggested that, in order to fully understand a visual-textual joke, the audience needs to be familiar with the evolution of the joke and see the different layers of meaning and reference, at least to some extent. Tony Veale (University College Dublin, Ireland) continued with irony in rule-based generative systems or automatic

'joke machines'. He argued that it is actually the audience that reads the information into the text, and their set of previous knowledge does not have to coincide with that of the humour creator, in this case – a computer programme. People look for newness, and putting old, recognisable elements into a novel context is a key to creativity and art – and quite often also to humour. He also referred to the paradox inherent in the attempts to bring together computers and humour: How can we build a rule-based system (a computer script) that can break the rules?

Sponsored symposia were centred around introducing the various associations dealing with humour and its applications: the Japanese Society for Laughter and Humor Studies (with a fascinating discussion about catastrophe humour, comparing its main features in Japan and in the United States); the Association for the Study of Play (talking about the positive effects that humour can have, e.g. in language learning, but also the darker side, e.g. bullying and teasing); the International Society for Luso-Hispanic Humor Studies, the Observatoire de l'Humour in Canada (giving a much-needed insight into French-language humour industry); the European Journal of Humour Research (bringing together research on humour and nationally specific communication styles); the Israeli Society for Humor Studies, the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor, and the American Humor Studies Association. The (growing) number of these associations and the wealth of topics that they cover give evidence of the versatility and vitality of the field.

As already mentioned, there were more than 150 paper presentations at the ISHS annual conference, divided into three parallel sessions over four and a half days. To mention only a few, Ayesha Ashfaq (University of Punjab Lahore, Pakistan) and Joshua L. Moss (University of California, US) presented their papers in the session called Humour in the Global Media, and initiated a polemical discussion on the role of and right to joke in the globalising world. The first speaker stressed the need for political correctness and formulated a set of rules for journalists and cartoonists in order to avoid international conflicts. Moss focused more on the process and not so much on the reception of humour, and blamed the missing context for causing what he called transnational humour controversies. Generally speaking, humour illuminates boundaries and elucidates them where they were hidden before. Worth noting is Elliott Oring's (California State University, US) critical presentation on so-called benign violations theory created by Peter McGraw and his team, which has received great media coverage but has been built on just a few doubt-raising studies and premises. Oring called upon researchers to check the evidence for their theories and thus contribute to a stronger academic validity of the field.

A good selection of workshops included a fast insight into Paul McGhee's humour intervention programme (The 7 Humor Habits Program), in which the author introduced the inner workings of his system and advocated for the daily use of small humour-related and humour-enhancing tasks.

The first conference day ended with a roundtable discussion of humour in animation art. People from Pixar Animation Studios and Cartoon Art Museum in San Francisco (Craig Good, Austin Madison, Jeff Pidgeon, Christian Roman, and Andrew Farago) spoke about creating visual humour. Their recent reference point was the animated movie *Inside Out* (2015), and although no visual examples were demonstrated to the public,

the discussion showed vividly that any humorous text has to contain a balancing amount of other emotional aspects in order to have an effect on the audience.

In addition to the academic programme, Dr Lampert had compiled an extremely varied and enjoyable evening programme, with the traditional ISHS joke-telling competition (this year unanimously won by the talented joke-teller and long-time ISHS member Joyce Saltman), and numerous other exciting events like an improv competition, stand-up comedy competition, and the play titled *Lend Me a Tenor*. Of these, the improv competition definitely deserves a mention as the most entertaining and professionally delivered one. The winner, Made Up Theatre from San Francisco, unfolded an unforgettable story of the importance of imaginary friends before the very appreciative audience, receiving the loudest applause and highest points of the jury.

The strong academic programme and amusing social events combined with the breath-taking views from the Oakland Hills overlooking the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Area made for a great conference. The next ISHS conference will take place in Dublin, Ireland, on June 27– July 2, 2016, under the title *Humour as Embodied Practice*, and will be hosted by Professor Eric Weitz from the Department of Drama, in partnership with the Trinity Long Room Hub, and with support from Fáilte Ireland.

Liisi Laineste