Hitler Comedy / Hitlerhoff
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Abstract

The critical component of this thesis, “Hitler Comedy”, is a dissertation on the intersection between comedy theory in general, and the specific practice of Hitler comedy. Focusing on Bertolt Brecht’s play *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (1941; directed by Heiner Müller in 1995), and Dani Levy's film *Mein Führer: the Truly Truest Truth About Adolf Hitler* (2007), my argument critiques existing “instrumentalist” theories of comedy as didactic and morally reductive. Moving beyond prevailing conceptualisations of comedy as corrective and/or forgiving, my dissertation emphasises the centrality of pleasure, displeasure and disruption for audience members in the process of experiencing Hitler comedies.

The creative component of this thesis is a script and a DVD recording of *Hitlerhoff*, a theatre and multimedia work that combines the characters of Adolf Hitler and David Hasselhoff into a single hybrid figure. *Hitlerhoff* is a spectacular black comedy that uses comedy to entertain and unsettle, and to disrupt audience members’ expectations. *Hitlerhoff* is a practical demonstration of the ability of “irresponsible” comedy to act as a potent catalyst for “responsible”, ethically engaged discussions.
Declaration

This is to certify that:

1. the thesis comprises only my original work except where indicated in the preface;

2. due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used;

3. the thesis is 30,000 words in length, inclusive of footnotes but exclusive of tables, maps, appendices and bibliography.

Thomas James Doig                                               December 2009
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Dissertation:
Hitler Comedy
**Introduction**

**The laughing-about-Hitler problem**

In 1953, eight years after Hitler’s death, political philosopher Leo Strauss coined the term *reductio ad Hitlerum*. This term described the increasing prevalence of arguments that sought to discredit one’s opponents by associating them with Germany’s former Führer, who “has become the face of 20th-century evil in the same way that Marilyn Monroe has come to symbolize 20th-century sex” (Morris). At the same time, Strauss’s witticism reveals (perhaps unwittingly) another infectious equivalence: between Hitler and absurdity. The simplest and most common means of committing comic *reductio ad Hitlerum* is to draw a toothbrush moustache on an image of someone’s face; within seconds, the unfortunate visage is contaminated with an absurd Hitler-ness. When examined closely, however, the ultimate effect/affect of this act is almost impossible to define. Is it a political statement; a harmless joke; an unforgivable outrage; or something else entirely?

![Image of Hitler with a toothbrush moustache]

This dissertation is concerned with the problematic relationship between theories of comedy and instances of comedic practice, in the particular case of comedy about Adolf Hitler. My research question, broadly phrased, is this: What are the implications of using comedy to represent Hitler, sixty-four years after Hitler’s death? More specifically, what
are the implications of representing Hitler comically as a performer, who consciously acts as “Der Führer”?

My thesis is that many prevailing interpretations of Hitler comedy, which identify corrective or forgiving moral justifications for outrageous comic performances (Wood, 4), miss the more ethically complex and more richly comic experiences that actually occur as audiences laugh. There is a tendency among commentators to focus on the socially responsible motives for comedy; in the process, theories of comedy are constantly at risk of overlooking the fundamental pleasure that comedy produces in audiences, which is essential to its operation. This tendency is exacerbated when the subject matter is as serious as Adolf Hitler. As a result, readings of Hitler comedy are often overly serious, quick to moralise, and – ironically – humourless. These interpretations are also instrumentalist, in that they only see humour as a means to an end. Such approaches fail to engage with the indirect, coded nature of jokes (see Trahair, Horton); the ambivalence these jokes generate; and the presence of an irresponsible, even transgressive pleasure. As a remedy to this, I wish to advance a less didactic, more process-based model of how comedy affects audience members, and by extension, society. I wish to acknowledge comedy’s intrinsic interest in pleasure, which manifests itself most blatantly in slapstick, and show how this pleasure is central to any coherent account of the ethical function of comedy. Jokes that succeed in producing pleasure out of unpleasant and distressing subject matter have a cathartic effect (Freud, 222-8). At the same time, I argue, comedians can use pleasure to produce anti-cathartic effects, by generating enjoyment then purposefully disrupting it with elements of discomfort and displeasure, creating conflicted audience responses. In this way, Hitler comedies can raise questions about the limits of what we find funny, as individuals and as a society; these questions have important political and moral implications. This is therefore still an ethically engaged conception of how Hitler comedies function, but it sees the humour as the starting point – the catalyst – of ethical discussions, rather than as their conclusion.

**Hitler prepares: the Führer as ham actor**

I am particularly concerned with comedic representations of Hitler in theatre and film, as these have most directly influenced *Hitlerhoff*, the creative component of this thesis. Film and theatre are both able to produce a sense of live-ness, and can parallel Hitler’s own manipulation of the media of film (via propaganda reels) and live performance (via his political rallies). In my analysis, I will be examining the work of three of the most influential German-speaking figures of the twentieth century: Adolf Hitler, Bertolt
Brecht, and Sigmund Freud. I will also be examining two more contemporary German-speaking figures: Heiner Müller and Dani Levy. I have chosen to compare and contrast Heiner Müller’s 1995 production of Bertolt Brecht’s play The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui (1942; henceforth referred to as Arturo Ui) and Dani Levy’s film Mein Führer: the Truly Truest Truth about Adolf Hitler (2007; henceforth referred to as Mein Führer). Both Arturo Ui and Mein Führer use humour to undermine the Nazi myth of Hitler as a godlike figure by revealing and emphasising the performative nature of Hitler’s public speeches; more specifically, they show him to be an actor, reliant on banal rhetorical techniques. Furthermore, Arturo Ui and Mein Führer are both Hitler comedies that establish an ambivalent relationship between Hitler’s ridiculous onstage/onscreen presence, and the decidedly non-humorous historical reality of the Nazi regime. There are also important differences between the ways that Arturo Ui and Mein Führer have been critically received as comedies. Brecht’s play is generally considered to be an unsympathetic – or consciously anti-sympathetic – corrective comedy; whereas Levy’s film has been criticised for being overly forgiving of Hitler. This dissertation will problematise these reductive, polarised readings, arguing that the practical experience of witnessing comedy produces more pleasurable, ambivalent and disturbing affects than the critical consensus suggests, and that it is more productive to think of both works as comedies of disruption. Mein Führer and Arturo Ui are particularly important to my argument because they are the two Hitler comedies that most influenced my composition of Hitlerhoff, a hybrid theatre-film performance work, which represents a Hitler-figure as an aspiring actor in a purposefully baffling way.

This dissertation is more exploratory than polemical; I have tried to let theory and practice speak to each other, rather than using theatre and film to prove theoretical points (or vice versa). My argument focuses on the what and the how of Brecht and Levy’s comedies; I wish to tease out the specific comedic logics operating within the works, and examine the problematic ways they are articulated and interpreted. At this point it is worth emphasising that I am only interested in Hitler as a historiographic figure inasmuch as this affects his dramatic representation as a humorous figure; this thesis is about comedy, not historical accuracy. I will begin with a discussion of comedy theory, introducing the concept of instrumentalism, which manifests itself in Wood’s categories of “comedy of correction” and “comedy of forgiveness”, before suggesting ways to move beyond these reductive concepts and categories. I will then analyse Arturo Ui and Mein Führer in some detail, combining elements of a reception study with
extended close readings of key scenes from each work. My close analysis will focuses on “the minimum unit of comic plot: the individual joke, or gag” (Palmer, in Horton, 1); this is the level at which comedy is explicable as comedy. It is important to remember John Wright’s practical advice that “you’re not doing comedy if nobody laughs” (5). I will focus on key scenes from within Arturo Ui that show Ui-Hitler as a performer – namely, the acting lesson scene with Mahonney (Scene Six) and Ui’s “Murder! Extortion! Highway robbery!” speech directly following it (Scene Seven). I will then compare and contrast these scenes with Dani Levy’s representation of Hitler in Mein Führer. Levy deals with identical subject matter – Hitler receiving acting lessons from a Schauspieler – but with different comedic strategies, which produce divergent audience reactions. At the same time, I will show how both Hitler comedies employ similar comedic strategies, which are best understood not in terms of comedy of correction or forgiveness, but as something much more interesting and potent, namely comedies of disruption.

I am specifically interested in the complex inter-relationships between competing comedic impulses in Levy’s film and Brecht’s play, and in the dialectical relationship between the two comedies; this dissertation does not examine Arturo Ui’s and Mein Führer’s significance within a larger tradition of Hitler comedy. That suggests a much larger – as yet unwritten – project, which would trace a comprehensive genealogy of comic representations of Hitler from the beginnings of his political career in the 1920s through to the present. Such a project could start with the political cartoons from Munich newspapers before Hitler’s rise to power; address humorous Hitler-representations throughout the Third Reich, their peak in World War Two, and their continuation into the late twentieth century; and culminate by addressing the present proliferation of Hitler parodies and memes on YouTube and across the World Wide Web. A project of this scope would include important theatrical and filmic Hitler comedies I am unable to discuss in detail here, such as Georg Tabori’s play Mein Kampf (1987), and films such as Charlie Chaplin’s The Great Dictator (1940), Ernst Lubitsch’s To Be or Not to Be (1941) and Mel Brooks’ The Producers (1967). The Great Dictator and The Producers are the most notable omissions from this current study of Hitler-as-actor, but these omissions are justified, given the specificity of my investigation. While The Great Dictator seeks to unmask Hitler’s political posturing as a ridiculous performance, Chaplin’s Hitler (Adenoid Hynkel) does not explicitly rehearse and practice “playing Hitler” the way that Brecht’s Arturo Ui and Levy’s Hitler do. And while The Producers
features a number of actors playing Hitler, it doesn’t feature a non-fictional Hitler character, playing himself, and is thus not directly relevant to this study.

A larger survey would also provide the scope to analyse serious representations of Hitler that contain comic elements, or are open to comic readings – such as Hans-Jurgen Syberberg’s *Hitler, ein Film aus Deutschland* (1977), Christoph Schlinginsief’s *100 Jahre Adolf Hitler – Die letzte Stunde im Führerbunker* (1989), Menno Meyjes’s *Max* (2002) and Oliver Hirschbiegel’s *Downfall* (2003). Furthermore, a comprehensive survey of Hitler comedies could look beyond film and theatre, encompassing literary texts; cartoons (prime examples would include Walter Moers’ book-length German-language comic strips *Adolf* (1998) and *Adolf 2* (1999), as well as Hitler’s regular cameos in *The Family Guy* and *South Park*); songs; the banned *Flüsterwitze* (“whispered jokes”) of Nazi-era Germany; video games and more. It would also allow engagement with the similarities and differences between German comedy, comedy from the USA, and comedy from other countries, such as Russia’s recent *Hitler Kaput!* (*Hitler’s Kaput!*, 2008). I believe that such an ambitious project would go some way towards filling a critical vacuum; for while there is a body of literature on comedy theory, a large number of comedic representations of Hitler, and an overwhelming amount of scholarship on Adolf Hitler as a historical figure, there is a remarkable lack of dialogue between these fields of inquiry. As a result, there is a scarcity of analysis of comic representations of Hitler. Although the Hitler in Levy’s *Mein Führer* protests “I’m more suited to the dramatic than the comic”, it is clear that in recent years comedy has become a preferred method of representing the Führer. This dissertation’s discussion of *Arturo Ui* and *Mein Führer* is therefore a contribution towards bridging the gulf between comedy studies and the field that Don De Lillo has satirically christened “Hitler Studies” (4).

**Literature Review**

In the field of comedy studies, there are three main prevailing theories of comedy: the Superiority theory, the Relief theory, and the Incongruity theory (Critchley, 2). Arthur Koestler’s *The Act of Creation* (1964) is a key text, which helped to popularise the Incongruity theory of humour. Henry Bergson’s *Laughter: an Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1904) is often taken as paradigmatic of the Superiority theory of humour. Although this work is important historically, Bergson’s insights about “la mecanization de la vie” (the mechanisation of life) now seem rather limited. Bergson’s enduring relevance in comedy studies is arguably his influence on Sigmund Freud’s *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), a seminal text responsible for the Relief theory of
humour. While many commentators express doubts over the coherence of Freud’s claims that “the pleasure [of jokes] comes from a saving” (228) of energy, and hence provides a form of psychic “relief”, Freud’s work has nonetheless proved much more influential than that of Bergson or Koestler. Many recent studies have been influenced by Freud – including Simon Critchley’s *On Humour* (2002), Geoff King’s *Film Comedy* (2002), Lisa Trahair’s *The Comedy of Philosophy: Sense and Nonsense in Early Cinematic Slapstick* (2007), and James Wood’s *The Irresponsible Self: on Laughter and the Novel* (2004). In this context, Wood’s distinction between “the comedy of correction” and “the comedy of forgiveness” is particularly useful, as it relates to Freud’s categories of “tendentious jokes” (87) and “broken humour” (226) respectively. Wood’s discussion engages with Freud’s and Bergson’s work in a general way, and his categories are applicable to my study of theatre and film.

In the area of film theory, Geoff King’s *Film Comedy* (2002) gives an excellent overview of how general philosophical theories of humour relates to the analysis of film comedy. King’s description of satire as “unstable” (94) and his commentary on the “outer limits of the darkest comedy” (190) are particularly relevant to this thesis. In *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (1991), Slavoj Zizek delineates a kind of self-conscious, compromised “enjoyment” (239), which supports King’s thesis about the complexity of people’s affective responses to black comedy. Lisa Trahair’s *The Comedy of Philosophy: Sense and Nonsense in Early Cinematic Slapstick* (2007) is relevant in terms of theoretical approach and methodology. Trahair’s “main concern is with what the comic means, or, more precisely, what its relation to meaning is” (1); she argues that “to comprehend the comic [...] is to risk overlooking the structure of incomprehensibility that is crucial to its operation” (15) – a concern that is central to my thesis. Trahair also theorises about slapstick in a way that is very useful for this dissertation; so does Alan Dale, in *Comedy is a Man in Trouble* (2000), particularly in relation to Charlie Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator*, although his comments are relevant to Hitler comedy more generally. Other relevant texts include Andrew Horton’s *Comedy/Cinema/Theory* (1991), which utilises Koestler’s concept of “bisociation” (6) in a lucid manner; Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957); Susan Sontag’s “Notes on Camp” (1964); and Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and his World* (1965).

There is very little secondary literature in English for the primary texts I have chosen to explore in this thesis. (A more comprehensive PhD-length project would require literacy in German.) General discussions of Brecht and comedy include: Louise Bird’s *The Comic
World of Bertolt Brecht (1968); Moray McGowan’s “Comedy and the Volksstück” (1982); Angela Rose Rojter’s MA, “Comedy and ideology: a study of Shakespeare’s Henry IV Parts One and Two and Brecht’s later plays” (1982); Elizabeth Wright’s Postmodern Brecht: A Re-Presentation (1989); Mark Roche’s “Comic reduction and comic negation in Brecht” (1998); and Frederic Jameson’s Brecht and Method (1998). Brecht’s Arturo Ui has received some critical attention, either as a literary text or as a specific performance: see Worrall; Billington; Willett and Manheim; Rojter; D.G. Matthews and S. M. Matthews; McGowan; Needle and Thompson; Willett; Esslin; Msamati; Ruland; Tynan; Heilpern; Horowitz. Adorno’s essay “On Commitment” (1960) is emblematic of the instrumentalist approach to Arturo Ui, as is Atkins’ “Un es ist Gott ausser Adolf Hitler: the Biblical motifs in Brecht’s Arturo Ui and related works as political counter-propaganda” (1990). Some of the most substantial work in English on Heiner Müller’s 1995 production of Arturo Ui has been produced by Denise Varney. Varney’s “Grotesque images and sardonic humour: pain and affect in German drama” (2005) is particularly relevant to this thesis, as is “The Last Laugh of Betty Dullfeet: The Berliner Ensemble’s Arturo Ui (1995)” (2007) and the earlier “Comedy as Critique: Heiner Müller directs Arturo Ui at the Berliner Ensemble” (2004). Varney’s “Heiner Müller and Martin Wuttke: staging new images in a time of change” (2005), while not specifically focused on comedy, is nonetheless edifying. There are a number of German-language reviews of the 1995 Heiner Müller production: by Manuel Brug (“(East) German customs”), Gerhard Ebert (“Because that’s the way man is”), Ernst Schumacher (“Where Theatre Shows the Flag – Brecht’s Arturo Ui-parable in Klagenfurt/Vienna and Berlin – a comparative examination”), Sabine Seifert (“The Beast with the Side-parting”) and Peter Laudenbach (“More Questions than answers: Heiner Müller speaks about Arturo Ui” and “Why was Hitler so Fascinating?”).

There is much less written about Dani Levy’s Mein Führer in English or German, owing firstly to its recent theatrical release, secondly to its limited release in English-speaking countries (a DVD is available, but without English subtitles), and thirdly potentially due to its initial negative critical reception (a common problem to beset Hitler comedies). While this presents certain methodological difficulties, it also suggests the value and necessity of English-language analysis of this film. David Crossland has published a number of pertinent articles on Mein Führer on Spiegel Online: “Fun with the Führer: Hitler Farce Breaks German Taboos” (2006); “Germany’s First Hitler Comedy: Meet Hitler, the Bed-Wetting Drug Addict” (2006); and “Critics Pan Farce: Germany Not
Amused By Hitler Comedy” (2007). Daniel Haas’ “Mein Führer director talks: ‘Hitler Should Have Been in Therapy’,” (Spiegel Online, 2007), Harald Martenstein’s “Adolf on the couch” (Sight and Sound, 2007), and Henryk M. Broder’s “Dani Levy’s Failed Hitler Comedy” (Spiegel Online, 2007) are all key secondary sources, as is Derek Elley’s review for Variety (2007) and Karsten Marhold’s “Mein Führer: black comedy about brown fellows” (2007).

There are very few scholarly works specifically addressing the comedic representation of Adolf Hitler. Zbynek Zeman’s Heckling Hitler: Caricatures of the Third Reich (1987) is a book-length discussion of anti-fascist political cartoons from the 1920s through to the 1940s. Tobias Meyer’s MA project “Hitlerkarikaturen u Nazifuehrer” (2005) deals specifically with Russian political cartoons of Hitler from the same time period. Tony Barta’s “Film Nazis: The Great Escape” (1994) offers an excellent historical overview of how the filmic representations of Hitler have changed over time, and includes tangentially relevant discussions of To Be or Not to Be, The Producers and The Great Dictator. While there has been very little written specifically about Hitler comedy, the adjacent (and sometimes overlapping) discipline of “Holocaust comedy” contains some excellent scholarship that sheds light on the concerns of this thesis. In particular, Casey Haskins’ “Art, Morality, and the Holocaust: The Aesthetic Riddle of Benigni’s Life Is Beautiful” (2001) explores the vexed relationship between comedy and “responsibility”. Similarly, Maurizio Viano’s Life Is Beautiful: Reception, Allegory, and Holocaust Laughter” interrogates the relationship between comedy and tragedy within a single work. These considerations are applicable to my analyses of Arturo Ui and Mein Führer.
Chapter One
Comedy theory: correction, forgiveness, pleasure, disruption

Comedy scholars are fond of starting their discussions by acknowledging that theory and comedy are often seen as antithetical, if not downright antagonistic, forms. For example, Geoff King writes that “to analyse comedy, the cliché goes, is to destroy it. To seek to understand comedy through weighty theoretical speculation is to fail to grasp the nature of the beast, it is claimed” (4). In The Irresponsible Self: on Laughter and the Novel, James Wood makes a similar point: “it is regularly maintained that comedy cannot really be described or explained, that to talk about it is merely to do it noisy harm. Particular derision is reserved for the formal criticism of comedy, which seems to most sensible people like an unwitting bad joke, since nothing is funnier than solemnity about laughter” (1). After citing these claims, King and Wood refute them, managing to analyse comedy without losing their own sense of humour. Both these invocations do nonetheless draw attention to a central danger in theorising the comic: the potential to lose sight of the pleasure of comedy in the process of trying to understand it. At the risk of approaching an analysis of comedy’s fundamental strategies in much too sober a fashion, I will proceed here to outline the basic strategic choices comedy makes, and suggest a way to reconcile apparently dialectically opposed strategies. In the following chapters I will argue for and explicate a form of reception that accepts comedy’s serious engagement with serious issues while still acknowledging its primary purpose of generating pleasure.

To begin with, it is necessary to articulate exactly what I consider comedy to be. Northrop Frye attempts to establish comedy as a genre, distinct from its neighbours satire and romance, although Frye admits that “comedy blends insensibly into satire at one extreme and into romance at the other” (162). Frye’s distinction seems like contrived formalism to a contemporary readership, for whom “satire” is a subset of “comedy” (similarly, “romantic comedy” has become a distinct sub-genre of its own). Brecht scholar Elizabeth Wright has argued against this kind of essentialist formalism, asserting instead that “there is no comic essence, only a discourse of power” (64). Similarly, Horton warns against theoretical “essentialism” (Comedy 9), arguing that while everything is potentially funny, “nothing is inherently funny or sad, humorous or tragic” because “comedy is a way of looking at the universe, more than merely a genre” (Laughing 5). While Wright and Horton’s statements are no doubt accurate, their
relativism is unfortunately not very useful for enabling the identification and evaluation of comedy. Critchley goes some way to resolving this essentialist-versus-relativist impasse, by reminding us that “joking is a specific and meaningful practice that the audience and the joke-teller recognise as such. There is a tacit social contract at work here, namely some agreement about the social world in which we find ourselves as the implicit background to the joke” (3-4, italics mine). Following Critchley, I treat comedy as a social process, rather than a fixed essence – or a lack thereof. As Horton himself argues in *Cinema/Comedy/Theory*, “like language and ‘texts’ in general, the comic is plural, unfinalised, disseminative, dependent on context and the intertextuality of creator, text and contemplator. It is not, in other words, just the content of the comedy that is significant but also its ‘conspiratorial’ relationship with the viewer” (9). In practice, then, audience members find certain things funny, while they find other things tragic, or romantic, offensive. Individual reactions vary, but taken in their entirety, the audience’s response works to establish a joke (or play, or film) as comedy, as much as the comedian does. This generic status is therefore socially constructed, and remains contingent, subject to change. At the same time, to laugh is to implicitly assent to a certain “discourse of power” (Wright), whether one is aware of – or consenting to – this process.

As previously noted, Wood makes a productive distinction between the comedy of correction, and comedy of forgiveness. For Wood, the former “is a way of laughing at”, while the latter is “a way of laughing with” (4). (Of course, while a theoretical discussion can erect categorical boundaries between “correction” and “forgiveness”, in the practice of specific comedies these impulses often overlap, interfere, and “blend insensibly” (Frye) with each other. It is therefore more productive to think of them as comedic strategies rather than stable generic properties.) For Wood, comedies of correction represent “the dream of transparency, the victory of knowing over the haze of unreliability [and] the existence of a stable system of human categorisation” (13). This conception is compatible with definitions of traditional satire. For example, Frye defines satire as “militant irony”, claiming that “its moral norms are relatively clear, and it assumes standards against which the grotesque and absurd are measured” (223). Frye sees two elements as “essential to satire; one is wit or humor founded on fantasy or a sense of the grotesque or absurd, the other is an object of attack” (224). King stresses the extra-textual, real-world implications of satire, defining it as “comedy with an edge and a target, usually social or political in some way” (93). Satire is based on “fault-finding,
reprehension and correction” (Wood, 4), and exhibits “the stability of didacticism” (6). This kind of comedy seeks to administer “punishment for those who deserve it” (8). This corresponds with Freud’s conception of tendentious humour, which has a particular “tendency or intention” (87). Tendentious humour is “a particular favourite for use in enabling criticism or aggression towards persons in high places who claim authority” (102), because it “can make a person comical in order to make him contemptible and rob him of any claim on dignity or authority” (185). As a category, then, comedy of correction is unapologetically instrumental; it has clear aims, sees itself as socially responsible, and is most closely aligned with the Superiority theory of humour. In the context of this thesis, Hitler is the primary target for correction. In fact, so many things are obviously wrong with his thoughts, behaviour and actions that Hitler is one of the safest targets for ridicule in the Western world. In the process of analysing this kind of humour, however, recognition of its desire to point out Hitler’s wrong-headedness and evil nature can often overshadow the pleasurable, often ambivalent methods it uses to enact its supposed corrections.

By contrast, comedies of forgiveness are less concerned with effecting social change; instead, they exhibit “a kind of tragi-comic stoicism” (4) in tone. Rather than positing corrective moral distinctions and establishing a sense of audience superiority over the butt/s of their jokes, comedies of forgiveness “offer a helpless commonality” (3) between audience and character. For Wood, forgiving comedy is “based on the management of our incomprehension rather than on the victory of our complete knowledge” (8), and is in this sense sceptical rather than didactic. Wood’s account of “moments of mingled tears and laughter” (12) draws on Freud’s theory of “broken humour”. For Freud, “humour is a means of obtaining pleasure in spite of the distressing affects that disturb it” (222). Humour has the task of removing any possibility that an [unpleasant] affect might emerge to bar the pleasurable effect. It can nullify this emergence entirely or just partially – which is even the more frequent case, because it is more easily achieved, and produces the various forms of “broken” humour, the sort that smiles in the midst of tears. (226)

According to Wood, the overall effect of these comedies is to elicit “forgiveness for those who don’t [deserve it]” (6). While comedies of correction aim to produce emotional and psychological distance between the audience and their subject matter, comedies of
forgiveness collapse this distance. Woods writes that “the comedy of correction may amuse us but it rarely moves us, because it does not intend to [...] whereas the comedy of forgiveness has as one of its aims the generation of sympathetic emotion” (9, italics mine). In most cases, this sense of empathy is seen as more sophisticated and therefore ethically superior to the judgemental stance of corrective comedies (Critchley, 14). In the unusual case of Hitler comedy, however, this becomes a provocative, even offensive position. If ridiculing and therefore “correcting” Hitler is one of the least controversial ways to make comedy, suggesting a helpless commonality between Hitler and audience members is one of the most controversial positions one can take, as Chapter Two will show.

Both corrective and forgiving comedies are instrumentalist, in that they have clear intentions beyond the pleasure of joking. Instrumentalist comedy is nevertheless still comedy. Freud is at pains to “stress that the activity of joking cannot be said to have no aim or purpose, for it has set itself the unmistakable aim of arousing pleasure in the listener” (93). This can be supplemented by Brecht’s own assertion that “nothing needs less justification than pleasure” (“Organum”, 181). Comedy’s fundamental aim of providing pleasure should not be overlooked, if we are to articulate an adequate theoretical account of this process. Even if a joke “has a tendency or intention” (87), it also functions for its own sake. This is a neglected aspect of Freud’s theory, even overlooked by Freud himself. It is a neglected aspect of comedy theorising in general. Trahair argues convincingly that widespread critical “anxiety over the meaning of the comic almost inevitably leads to a reduction of the comic object to its significance. What is intrinsically comic about the object is lost in the rational articulation of what the comic means” (7). Most readings of Arturo Ui, and to a lesser extent Mein Führer, suffer from this significance-focused, instrumentalist tendency. Engaging with these Hitler comedies as the means to purely corrective or forgiving ends, I argue, amounts to a failure to meet the comedy on its own comedic grounds, i.e. a failure to engage with the seriously uncomfortable ambivalence of the pleasure of the jokes. I agree with Trahair’s position to the extent that it refocuses comedic theory on a “structure of incomprehensibility that is crucial to [comedy’s] operation” (15); in Trahair’s account, “the comic emerges from a relationship between reason and unreason” (ibid). Trahair makes another important point which complicates any instrumentalist interpretation of comedies: “even when the comic is intentionally produced, the audience does not decode it as it might an informational message. The comic as code must not be recognised, because recognition
entails an evaporation in advance of the feeling of comic pleasure” (111, italics mine). As a form, then, comedy is fundamentally opaque, indirect and unstable. For Trahair, attempts to extract a unified, non-contradictory “informational message” from comedy amount to a “fundamental absurdity” (7). At best, this produces an incomplete reading of comedic works, which negates their unruly comic pleasure; at worst, it amounts to a misreading.

In order to better engage with the pleasure of comedy, it is important to discuss a third category not present in Wood’s discussion, which is particular to theatre and film comedy: slapstick. Trahair quotes Don Wilmeth’s definition, in which slapstick relies on “expert timing”, and “implies both the use of physical gags aimed against someone for laughs and a sense of unreality as a result of the broad gags and the improbability of the stunts” (47). While both slapstick and corrective comedy mercilessly ridicule people, this does not mean that slapstick is inherently corrective; on the contrary, slapstick is usually gloriously irresponsible and gratuitous. In Comedy Is a Man in Trouble (2000) Dale writes that “slapstick occurs anytime things go wrong physically for the hero in such a way that we know the movie-makers are inviting us to laugh” (10). For Dale, “slapstick is a fundamental, universal, and eternal response to the fact that life is physical” (11), characterised by “bewilderment, determination, exasperation” (Powell, in Dale, 10). Dale’s description of slapstick shares elements with forgiving comedy, in that it is a “universal response” that suggests a helpless commonality. In his discussion of The Great Dictator, Dale argues that “slapstick binds the clown to his audience: we identify with anyone who gets it in the face when he’s just trying to carry on – even if he is a fascist despot” (31). While this is no doubt partially true, there are many people who would disagree with Dale’s suggestion that they are “bound” to Hynkel-Hitler by Chaplin’s performance. I contend that the function of slapstick comedy is not reducible to either corrective or forgiving impulses. On the contrary: it functions as a deconstructive force that exceeds, undermines and destabilises any instrumentalist interpretation of comedy. In the context of corrective satire, slapstick gags reduces intellectual distance, and are thus anti-corrective – though not necessarily forgiving. Conversely, in a forgiving, sympathetic tragicomedy, slapstick disrupts the sense of empathy between character and audience; it is therefore unforgiving, though again this does not equate simply to a corrective drive. In my understand of Hitler comedy, slapstick is an unstable third category that operates as a “structure of
incomprehensibility” (Trahair) around and between the correction/forgiveness dichotomy, complicating and confounding straightforward decodings of the comedy.

In the case of Hitler comedies such as Mein Führer and Arturo Ui, it is particularly interesting – and potentially enlightening – when this unruly, irresponsible slapstick comedy is purposefully disrupted by the more serious, responsible concerns of instrumentalist comedy. When comic pleasure collides with references to real suffering, trauma, horror and guilt, this creates an unsettling mood which is not purely comic. At this point, it is worth introducing Gilles Deleuze’s cinematic concept of the “out-of-field”. For Deleuze, “[t]he out-of-field refers to what is neither seen nor understood, but is nevertheless perfectly present” (16) – in this context, Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. Interestingly, Deleuze’s description of the out-of-field captures the traumatic, unrepresentable otherness of the Holocaust itself: “the out-of-field testifies to a more disturbing presence, one which cannot even be said to exist, but rather to ‘insist’ or ‘subsist’, a more radical Elsewhere, outside of homogenous space and time” (17). The continual intrusion of the obscene (“off-stage”) presence of the Holocaust is a key feature of both Müller and Levy’s works. King writes extensively about “the outer limits of the darkest comedy” (190), arguing that the “mixture or merging of comedy with other dimensions [is] complex, challenging and unsettling” (171) for audiences. King argues that comedy which includes non-comic elements, such as violence and horror, “leaves the viewer, unaided, to decide what to do, emotionally, with an acute mixture of tragic and comic resonances, neither of which cancels out the other” (196). For King, this “combination […] is hard to synthesise into any neat and disposable formula, and thus possesses more lingering disturbing impact” (193). King is particularly interested in the process of “wrong-footing the audience through sudden shifts of tone” (181), arguing that “changes in tone can themselves be disturbing, more so, in some cases, than clear-cut or unrelenting ‘seriousness’ ” (180). When audience members laugh, then are forced to stop laughing, then invited to start laughing again, it elicits more complex, guarded forms of audience pleasure than “lighter” comedy does. For the purposes of this essay, I will define this as the comedy of disruption. This is related to Zizek’s conceptualisation of a self-conscious, compromised form of enjoyment:

a simple illicit love affair without risk concerns mere pleasure, whereas an affair which is experienced as a “challenge to the gallows” – as an act of transgression – procures enjoyment; enjoyment is the “surplus” that comes from our knowledge
that our pleasure involves the thrill of entering a forbidden domain – that is to say, our pleasure involves a certain displeasure. (239)

This concept of a pleasure disrupted by displeasure is, I argue, central to the operation of Müller and Levy’s comedies, and Hitler comedy in general. A less didactic, more dialectical model for the ethical imperative of comedy then suggests itself. Rather than informing and educating passive audiences about what is right and wrong, this more complex comedy of disruption can generate productive inner conflicts, which provoke a need for reconciliation and synthesis. In this way, irresponsible comedy nonetheless has the potential to elicit responsible audience reactions, without predetermining the moral stance of these reactions.
Chapter Two

Laughing at Hitler: Arturo Ui as comedy of correction

*I always have the desire to burden the recipients with so much [information] that they don’t know which should be the first item to carry, and I believe that is the only option ... Today, one has to show as many points as possible at the same time so that people are forced to select.*

– Heiner Müller, 1975

In order to show how my close reading of Arturo Ui responds to and builds on a history of the play’s critical reception, it is necessary to sketch an overview of the prevailing critical categorisations and evaluations of the work. There is a loose critical consensus that the play is some kind of comedy; usually it is considered to be of the corrective kind. Brecht himself characterised Arturo Ui as a “historical farce” (*Journal*, 77), a “satire” (in Worrall, lxxii) and a “comedy” (ibid, lxxiv). Most accounts of the play agree with Brecht’s assessment, describing it as a “satire” (Worrall, 2002; Willett and Manheim, 2000; Rojter, 1982; D.G. Matthews and S. M. Matthews, 1981) and/or a “comedy” (McGowan, 1982; Needle and Thompson, 1981), but also sometimes as a “parody”, (Worrall, 2002; Willett, 1960; Esslin, 1959), a “comic allegory” (Msamati, 2008; Ruland, in Worrall, lii), and as similar variations such as “Nazi-travesty” (Brug, 1995), “clown play” (Lahr, 2002), “macabre farce” (Tyan, in Heilpern) and “grotesque historical-play (Sefert, 1995). Horowitz’s 2000 review of Wuttke’s performance during the Berliner Ensemble’s tour of the USA attempts to cover multiple bases by calling Arturo Ui an “epic, satiric, tragicomedy” (121) as well as a “cartoonish parable” (122). Most discussions of Arturo Ui as a comedy focus on the play’s corrective tendencies, namely Brecht’s aggressive ridicule of Ui and his henchmen – and, by extension, Brecht’s ridicule of Adolf Hitler, Goebbels, Goering, Röhm et al. Central to this interpretation is Brecht’s oft-quoted statement that “the great political criminals must be completely stripped bare and exposed to ridicule. Because they are not great political criminals at all, but the perpetrators of great political crimes, which is something quite different” (in Worrall, lxxii-lxxiii). Brecht’s professed intentions are congruent with Freud’s understanding of the motive of tendentious jokes: “by making our enemy small, mean, contemptible, comical, we take a roundabout route to getting for ourselves the enjoyment of vanquishing him, which the third person – who has gone to no effort – endorses with his laughter” (100). Brecht thus arguably intends a specific, instrumentalist purpose for his comedy beyond its immediate pleasure, where
the debasement and degradation of a Hitler-figure (Ui) is harnessed for corrective ends. For Wood, “the comedy of correction [...] is satirical in impulse, frequently violent and farcical, keen to see through the weaknesses of mankind” (4). This description echoes many critics’ readings of Arturo Ui, and Brecht’s own statements – although my own reading of Müller’s production of the play will work to complicate and subvert such clear distinctions.

Ui’s “silly walk”

I wish to analyse Ui’s “silly walk” during the acting lesson scene in some detail, as it sheds light on the limitations of corrective, instrumentalist interpretations of Brecht’s comedy, and suggests the value of more complex, non-didactic approaches to comedy. A representative corrective reading of the acting lesson scene can be found in Atkins’ “Un es ist Gott ausser Adolf Hitler: the Biblical motifs in Brecht’s Arturo Ui and related works as political counter-propaganda” (1990). Atkins writes that Brecht “devotes a scene to showing the creation of phoney images, as Ui practices the theatrical mannerisms designed to lend him an air of remoteness” (386). Atkins argues that by establishing a “context of calculated image-making” (ibid) and subjecting this process to ridicule, this scene “stamps Ui-Hitler’s messianic claim as the sheerest propaganda” (ibid). This corresponds with Freud’s account of tendentious humour, as discussed in Chapter One. In a strictly corrective interpretation, Arturo Ui’s acting lesson scene thus corrects audience members’ impressions of Hitler, by exposing his grand style as actually just a series of insincere images, which according to the old Shakespearean actor Mahonney can be acquired “in ten minutes” (44).

While Atkins’ view is acceptable as an abstract argument, it nonetheless fails to convey the exuberance and enjoyment the acting lesson conveys in performance. From Atkins’ descriptions, one has little impression of exactly how pleasurable it is for audiences to watch Ui learn how to walk and talk in the grand style – and this comic pleasure is central to the operation and the affect of the scene. Part of this problem stems from Atkins addressing the play as a literary text, rather than as a series of live, unpredictable performances: in Brecht’s own words, “proper plays can only be understood when performed” (“Conversation”, in Willett, 15). The actual experience of performing (and observing) the play produces more complex results – especially in the case of Heiner Müller’s subversive direction, and Martin Wuttke’s spectacular performance. In Müller’s production of Arturo Ui, the kind of corrective impulses which Atkins identifies, while present and admirable, are unable to be maintained, even in the apparently simple case
of Ui’s “silly walk”. My own close reading shows that in the space of ten minutes, the meaning of Ui’s walk passes through three distinct stages. It begins as pleasurable slapstick; this slapstick is subsequently deployed, instrumentally, in the service of corrective satire; immediately after this, however, Ui’s walk loses all silliness, and is performed as a non-comic, disturbingly impressive statesmanlike stride, which calls the very efficacy of corrective satire into question. My analysis aims to engage with the corrective, pleasurable, and disruptive aspects of the play’s comedy, without repressing any of these elements. This suggests a complex inter-relationship between different modes of comedy; it also suggests a more open instrumentalist reading of Arturo Ui, where the combination of pleasure and displeasure functions as a baffling provocation rather than as a strict lesson.

Ui begins his acting lesson by asking Mahonney: “How do you guys walk in the theatre or the opera?” (44). Mahonney responds: “I see what you mean. The grand style” (ibid). Mahonney gives Ui basic instructions: “Head back […] The foot touches the ground toe first […] arms in front of your private parts” (44). Ui carries out these directions to an absurd degree, taking exaggerated, uncertain, straight-legged steps across the stage, as if walking along an invisible tightrope that he might fall off at any second. There is a powerful comic incongruity here, as Ui’s attempt to look dignified produces such undignified results. This sequence provokes some of the most enthusiastic audience laughter of the show. The amount of energy that Ui expends walking in this manner is “disproportionate and impracticable” (Freud, 189); it intensifies the hilarity because, according to Freud, “a person should appear comical to us if he [sic] expends too much energy on the feats performed by his body and too little on those of his mind” (191). This is also a prime instance of what Freud defines specifically as caricature, which “degrades by highlighting one single intrinsically comical trait out of the sublime object’s expressive features as a whole; the kind of trait, that is, which was bound to be overlooked as long as it could only be perceived within the total picture” (196). In this case, by isolating three specific gestures, Mahonney’s instructions cause Ui to produce a hilarious deformation of Hitler’s “grand style”, familiar to a contemporary German audience primarily from Leni Riefenstahl’s Triumph of the Will (1936) – and perhaps secondly from Hitler comedies such as The Great Dictator.
Ui’s “silly walk” is in part a parody of the Nazi goosestep, but it also has other potential influences. In “Grotesque images and sardonic humour: pain and affect in German drama”, Varney argues that “the text [of Artruo Ui] is demonstrably influenced by […] Charlie Chaplin’s comic representation of Hitler in The Great Dictator” (Double Dialogues). However, Gerd Gemünden maintains that The Great Dictator is “a somewhat improbable source given the unlikelihood that the film was screened in Finland where Brecht completed the play, but certainly in keeping with Brecht’s general admiration for Chapin’s acting” (72). I would qualify Varney’s statement, arguing that Müller’s performance as Arturo Ui is demonstrably influenced by Chaplin’s turn as Adenoid Hynkel, even if Brecht’s script – which doesn’t include detailed stage directions – is not. At the same time, Wuttke’s performance of the “silly walk” in 1996 also potentially references Monty Python’s famous “Ministry of Silly Walks” sketch from 1970, itself an oblique parody of the goosestep, among other things.
While it is possible to interpret Ui’s walk purely as a corrective satire of Hitler’s vainglorious style, I would argue that in this context, Wuttke’s performance corresponds more closely with Don Wilmeth’s definition of *slapstick*, which relies on “expert timing”, and “implies both the use of physical gags aimed against someone for laughs and a sense of unreality as a result of the broad gags and the improbability of the stunts” (in Trahair, 47). Like Cleese’s grotesquely silly walks, which rely on “exaggeration, hyperbolism [and] excessiveness” (Bakhtin, 303), Ui’s own “silly walk” is improbable, excessive, and thus pleasurable to watch – in and of itself. That said, it is much *funnier* because Wuttke is playing Hitler, so that these slapstick excesses are connected to the Deleuzian out-of-field of the fascist marches. Taking a broader structural view of Müller’s production, Ui’s walking lesson in Scene Seven functions as an elaborate setup for a punchline that comes during his “Murder! Extortion! Highway robbery!” speech in Scene Eight. Ui makes an impassioned critique of Chicago’s “town fathers”:

These honorable men are much  
Too busy planning their shady little deals  
And slandering respectable citizens  
To think of law enforcement. (49)
After this, Ui abruptly pauses. He then struts back and forth across the stage in his newly acquired gait – head back, toes pointed, hands clutching his crotch – in an attempt to emphasise the seriousness of his words.

Of course, this dignified walk is actually ridiculous; audience members laugh uproariously. There are at least two levels of comedy in operation here. The first comic incongruity comes from the repetition of the grotesquerie of Ui’s slapstick walk itself, as detailed in the preceding paragraphs. Secondly, and more significantly, audience members are thoroughly aware that Ui is trying to manipulate them. In Scene Seven, Ui announces his instrumentalist motivations for learning Mahonney’s “grand style”: it is a deliberate attempt to “impress the little man” in the crowd with a contrived “image of his master” (46). Ui’s deployment of his new walk is therefore legible as an attempt to convince audience members, through performance, that he is dignified and authoritative. Ui is unsuccessful, for, as in Sontag’s description of Camp, “the essential element [of Ui’s walk] is seriousness, a seriousness that fails” (112). Audience members feel intense pleasure at having unmasked Ui’s scheme, and judge themselves both
superior to and utterly different from Ui. In this specific context, a Hobbesian laughter of “sudden glory” (in Critchley, 12) generates a critical distance from Ui. This “consequently leads the audience to be a consciously critical observer” (Brecht, “Alienation”, 91) of Ui’s manipulative, ridiculous behaviour. This sequence is an exemplary case of Müller using slapstick instrumentally, for clear corrective purposes. Ui’s failed seriousness adds to the corrective weight of the humour, as his unsuccessful attempt to embody authority is re-contextualised as the failure of Ui as a propagandist. Ui’s political conviction is unmasked as a mere performance of political conviction, not to be trusted – and the audience’s laughter is a sign of their resistance to the propagandistic element of Ui’s performance. Slapstick’s pleasurable excesses are thus harnessed to the politically responsible yoke of satire, in a way that remains thoroughly enjoyable to watch. There is one further stage in Müller’s estrangement of the apparently simple act of walking, however. Ui reaches a crucial point in his speech, and poses a weighty question:

And now maybe you’ll ask:

What’s to be done? (49)

Ui pauses; he then paces quickly back and forth across the stage for emphasis, before answering his own question. But this time no one laughs at Ui’s walk. Caricature is replaced by a faithful imitation of a statesmanlike stride, which now functions at “the level of the obvious and automatic” (Brecht, “Alienation”, 92); in the process, all pleasurable comic incongruity evaporates from the gesture. Ui’s performance is no longer satire, or slapstick; it has transformed into non-ironic demagoguery, with the power to impress. Ui’s walk now does convey his seriousness of purpose, and if the audience’s earlier laughter can be read as a sign of resistance to Ui’s propagandistic flourishes, the lack of laughter in this instance arguably must signify a lack of resistance. In other words, when Ui attempts to manipulate the audience, and fails, this is funny. But when Ui tries to manipulate the audience moments later and succeeds, despite our awareness of his intentions, this is deeply disconcerting – at least, it should be. Of course, audience members might not be consciously aware of the dramaturgical process whereby Ui’s walk is re-signified. There is a lot of movement and speech onstage; it is easy to miss a subtle and swift reference like this, especially on a first (and only) viewing. My point still stands, however. If audience members laugh correctly at Ui’s parody of a statesmanlike walk, yet fail to do so when faced with a non-parodic statesmanlike walk moments later, this raises serious questions about the efficacy of corrective comedy per se. If audience members fail to make a connection between their two conflicting
responses, this suggests that comedy’s ability to “correct” our understanding of the sinister performative nature of fascism is limited; because while comedy can easily caricature fascism, this does not necessarily affect the object being caricatured in any meaningful way.

This non-silly walk sequence thus reveals the limitations of instrumentalist, corrective theories of comedy, when applied to a complex live performance. Müller’s contrapuntal dramaturgy demonstrates how the techniques of defamiliarisation, while effective at times, are by no means all-powerful. The psychological distance and critical perspective it attempts to establish in audience members is fragile, ephemeral. Meanwhile, Ui’s performance demonstrates how seductively easy it remains for us to uncritically “listen rather than hear” (“Organum”, 187) – or, in the words of Arturo Ui’s epilogue, to “gape” rather than “see” (99). On the other hand, if audience members do notice the disjunction between their reactions – consciously, or perhaps subliminally – this has the potential to be disconcerting. This is arguably part of Müller’s strategy, which aims to purposefully generate cognitive dissonance by “wrong-footing the audience through sudden shifts of tone” (King, 181). My reading of Ui’s non-silly walk suggests that it is productive to consider the “complex, challenging and unsettling” (171) potential of Hitler comedy less instrumentally than traditional comedy theories allow, instead investigating how pleasure and displeasure can be simultaneously mobilised, and examining what effects this disruption has on audience members. I will address these questions in an examination of Ui’s representation as an “ineffective” public speaker in Scene Seven and Scene Eight, showing that Müller works to establish Ui, paradoxically, as simultaneously harmlessly banal and harmfully evil.

“Murder! Extortion! Highway robbery!”

As discussed earlier, the acting lesson scene builds up a sustained sense of audience pleasure, based on the spectacle of Ui bumbling about humiliating himself. Audience members settle into an elaborate and brilliantly performed sequence of Ui playing the fool. Ui doesn’t threaten, attack or kill anyone for over ten minutes, which is a relief after the menacing machinations of previous scenes. More pointedly, during his lesson Ui seems incapable of delivering the kind of mesmerising speeches that were so effective for Hitler, and so harmful for Europe. Mahonney gets Ui to read from Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar and to imitate Mahonney’s own theatrical gestures. Ui repeats these movements accurately, but mechanically, with no awareness of their rhetorical effect. This process is a great struggle for Ui – and this struggle is a great amusement for audience members. It
is an illustration of Bergson’s theory that laughter is a response to the apparent “mécanisation de la vie”, which Freud summarises thus: “everything about a living person that makes us think of an inanimate object has a comic effect” (203).

Ui imitates Mahonney [image removed for copyright reasons]

This amusing effect is generated because, according to Bergson, “the truth is that a really living life should never repeat itself. Wherever there is repetition or complete similarity, we always suspect some mechanism at work behind the living” (16). This happens when Mahonney shows Ui how to place emphasis on certain words; Ui mimics Mahonney’s intonations immediately, like a parrot or automaton, without seeming to understand why individual words should be stressed. Ui seems to be a parody of Mahonney – but nothing like the historical Hitler. This functions as what Freud calls a pleasurable “short-circuit” (118) of logic for the audience: it is enjoyable to believe that Ui – and by extension, Hitler – is a ridiculous speaker, rather than an impressive one. As a joke of this kind, Ui’s performance works to “bribe the listener with his [sic] own gain in pleasure into taking our side without probing too far” (100). This comedic sequence is ostensibly corrective in a number of ways. In his ignorance, Ui is represented as both
inferior to the audience, and in need of correction. At the same time, Ui’s naïve, unthinking repetition of words and gestures works to correct our understanding of the actorly gimmicks themselves, emptying them of their usual “grandness”, and hence of their persuasive power. In a review of a 1991 New York production of Arturo Ui, David Krasner argues that “Ui’s banality was exemplified in the ‘acting lesson’ scene”, which Krasner sees as “the strongest and most illuminating moment of the play” (531). In this context, Krasner’s invocation of “banality” necessarily invites comparison to Arendt’s famous statement about the “banality of evil” (252). Ui’s behaviour is arguably related to the sense of banality that Arendt diagnosed in Adolf Eichmann, where “his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to think, namely to think from the standpoint of someone else” (49). As he slavishly imitates Mahonney, Ui displays a comparable lack of imagination, failing to comprehend why Mahonney acts like he does. Ui’s unrelenting simplemindedness, however, makes this banality seem incompetent, and therefore unthreatening; harmless rather than evil. This sense of apparent innocuousness reaches a comic crescendo towards the end of the scene when Mahonney gestures to the sky; Ui imitates him involuntarily, and accidentally performs the Fascist
salute.

Intrigued by his gesture, Ui repeats it, flicking his fingers out more forcefully. This triggers uproarious laughter; interestingly, it is the only moment in this specific performance of Arturo Ui to provoke spontaneous audience applause mid-scene. This suggests that the audience’s response is not purely scornful; to speak of “corrective applause” here would seem a misnomer. The audience’s extreme enjoyment of the Nazi salute in this context should be taken not as a sign of their repressed fascist longings, but as a sign of the gesture’s failure to signify fascism. In Freud’s terms, Ui’s naivety works to
“open up again sources of comedy that have become inaccessible” (177) for 1990s German audiences. Because although the fascist salute is taboo, Ui is unaware of this fact, and makes the gesture innocently. This arm movement, usually so symbolically overdetermined, is thus neutralised by Ui’s ignorance – turned into a meaningless slapstick gesture. In his critique of Brecht’s play, Adorno argues that the “true horror of fascism is conjured away” (5) by this kind of relentless ridicule. For Adorno, there is a dangerous conclusion which is “dictated by the exigencies of agitation: adversaries must be diminished” (ibid). He is highly critical of such comic reduction, arguing that “against every dialectic, the ridicule to which Ui is consigned renders [fascism] innocuous” (5).

The example just cited suggests that Adorno’s position is accurate, up to a point; however, I argue that there is a more complex operation at work here, at least in the Berliner Ensemble’s production of _Arturo Ui_. In this case, Müller purposefully builds up this sense of harmlessness and banality, only to disrupt it drastically.

As Ui recites the final sentence of the speech from _Julius Caesar_, he seems for the first time to grasp the grand style of the speech. The acting lesson finishes unceremoniously at this point, montage-style: there is a loud blast of music, and a red curtain falls to the stage behind Ui, obscuring Mahonney. Ui is trapped onstage alone as the audience applauds the spectacularly pleasurable performance they have just witnessed. Ui stands self-consciously in front of the curtain, suddenly – and painfully – aware of the spectators watching him. He tries to adopt the crossed-arms pose of the dignified statesman which Mahonney has just taught him, but his hands keep slipping, as if they are out of his control; Bergsonian hilarity ensues. Ui almost manages to compose himself when, behind his back, the red curtain starts to rise.
The curtain rises without Ui’s knowledge – the audience laughs [image removed for copyright reasons]

This is a classic gag, where an action is obvious to audience members – but not to Ui, who functions as the butt of the joke. Once more, the audience laughs at Ui in amused superiority. As the stage is revealed, however, all of Ui’s henchmen are now arranged in a threatening fascistic tableau, looking deadly serious.

Ui – with henchmen, sans laughter [image removed for copyright reasons]
Any lingering audience laughter is interrupted by the very loud sound of a locomotive engine, as though a train is passing nearby. Muller’s dramaturgy thus manages to metaphorically “darken the stage so that our laughter freezes as [Ui] speaks” (Rissik, in Worrall, li). Horowitz writes that “these sound effects [...] served as chilling reminders that everything dramatised would eventually lead to Auschwitz” (123). Similarly, Cymbala observes that with these train sounds, “a century is being placed onto the tracks [...] and these tracks lead inevitably to war, to Auschwitz”. These sound effects trigger associations with the out-of-field of the Holocaust. It is not overstating the case, therefore, to argue that mid-laugh, audience members of Arturo Ui are figuratively placed next to a train leaving for Hitler’s death camps – or potentially on this train. Critchley argues that “the best humour sticks in our throats, and we begin to choke” (“Humour Noir”) this is an exemplary case of such troubling black humour.

When the audience is quiet, Ui launches into Scene Seven’s big speech, haranguing the audience about the dangers of “Murder! Extortion! Highway robbery! / machine-guns sputtering on our city streets” (48). This phrasing is a re-working of Shakespeare’s iconic “Friends, Romans, countrymen!” – but now, rather than being comically parodic, Ui’s words are rhetorically effective. Ui’s earlier comic uncertainty about speaking and gesticulating has disappeared; he now sounds uncomfortably like Adolf Hitler. At the same time, the obtusely allegorical nature of Shakespeare’s play about the Roman Empire is replaced by the cold, hard, out-of-field realities of life under the Third Reich. Ui also (re)deploys his newly acquired salute; but this has lost all parodic pleasure, and is chillingly fascistic. In this unpleasant moment, the audience members are once more re-positioned, this time as Mitläufer (fellow-travelers) at one of Hitler’s political rallies – or potentially as Nazis themselves.
These abrupt, disorienting shifts in tone are in keeping with Brecht’s “instructions for performance” of *Arturo Ui*, that “the comic element must not preclude the horror” (in Worrall, lxxi). Far from conjuring away the true horror of fascism, Müller’s provocative juxtaposition of Ui’s harmless buffoonery with the disturbing out-of-field presence of Nuremberg and Auschwitz arguably affirms Adorno’s claim that “the buffoonery of fascism [...] was at the same time its ultimate horror” (6). The affective power of these shifts confirms King’s point that “changes in tone can themselves be disturbing, more so, in some cases, than clear-cut or unrelenting ‘seriousness’ ” (180). For King, *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) is a paradigmatic work which juxtaposes comedy with graphic violence to purposefully confront, even traumatisé, audience members. Kael argues that in the case of *Bonnie and Clyde*, “people in the audience are laughing, demonstrating that they’re not stooges – that they appreciate the joke – when they catch the first bullet in the face” (62). This is what happens figuratively in *Arturo Ui*. As with *Bonnie and Clyde*, Müller’s production also “keeps the audience in a kind of eager, nervous imbalance – [the play] holds our attention by throwing our disbelief back in our faces” (ibid). By abruptly
shifting tones, from a seemingly harmless slapstick sequence “which tells the audience that it doesn’t need to feel or care, that it’s all just in fun, that ‘we were only kidding,’” Arturo Ui then “disrupts us with ‘And you thought we were only kidding’” (ibid). Suddenly, the joke is on the audience – and it isn’t funny at all. This retrospectively problematises the unadulterated enjoyment of the preceding sequence. It potentially retroactively provokes a sense of uneasiness, even guilt, for having laughed along with Ui’s stupid antics, all the while underestimating his actual threat.

As Ui’s speech progresses, even more complex (non)comedic dynamics are put into operation, and the sense of seriousness and horror the Berliner Ensemble have just established is deliberately destabilised. A few lines into his speech, Ui starts to lose his voice; his shout turns to a hoarse croak, then a whisper. The audience laughs: Ui is rendered harmless and ridiculous once more, which is a relief. Just after that, Ui regains his voice, and with it his harmfulness and horror. Ui then loses his voice again; some audience members laugh, nervously. Ui regains his voice, and continues his hateful speech, punctuating it with slapstick flourishes that are incongruous – but this incongruity is only partially pleasurable, because it is also disturbingly inappropriate. The train sound-effects repeat. During this sequence, the play’s tone fluctuates wildly, aiming to confuse and unsettle audience members. John Wright points out that “disturbing violence and raucous laughter are a hair’s breadth apart, and our ability to laugh depends on whether we believe the ‘ok’ signal or not” (12). In this case, the “ok” signal is the implausibility and unreality of slapstick comedy, which may or may not eclipse the traumatic historical reality of the Holocaust, depending on your predisposition. If and when audience members do laugh, this laughter is potentially compromised by the fact they should know better than to laugh; in this way, it involves a transgressive Zizekian “pleasure [that] involves the thrill of entering a forbidden domain” (239). At the same time, Freud’s notion of broken humour is also applicable, where humour attempts to find “a means of withdrawing energy from the release of unpleasure already mobilized, and by discharging it, transforming it into pleasure” (227). In this case, laughter is an attempt to avoid, or at least displace, the displeasure of experiencing Hitler in full flight – and it can only be partially successful. Both these responses – a compromised Zizekian enjoyment, and/or a nervous Freudian humour – are far more complex, and interesting, than a standard instrumentalist reading of Arturo Ui’s comedy allows.
A corrective analysis of Arturo Ui’s comedy is ideological, in that it seeks to correct the “false consciousness” of fascist politicking by unmasking it as mere performance. Such an analysis fails to take into account the persistent appeal and effectiveness of politics-as-performance, even after – or during – the deployment of Brechtian-style estrangement effects. An audience member’s response to Ui/Wuttke is fundamentally conflicted, due to the doubled nature of a performer acting a role, which creates a paradoxical sensation of non/identification. In the practice of witnessing comedy, it is impossible to wholly separate actor from character, both of whom appear onstage united in a single body. Even when audience members laugh scornfully at Ui-the-character as a ridiculous figure in need of correction, they are simultaneously laughing with Wuttke-the-performer – and admiring his comic genius, which needs no correction at all. In all works that rely on live performers impersonating Hitler, therefore, forgiveness is always already the repressed other of corrective comedy. Individual audience members will react to this inner conflict in different ways, but an irresolvable irony remains: the more effective an actor is at embodying Hitler-ness, thus provoking revulsion and displeasure, the more audience members will feel pleasure at the skill of this performance. A statement from Maurizio Viano’s article “Life Is Beautiful: Reception, Allegory, and Holocaust Laughter” suggests the possibility of a more nuanced engagement with this mode of comedy. Viano argues that Benigni’s film “disorients viewers by forcing them to experience the anxiety of an unexpected schizophrenic attack. The film splices together two halves that do not belong together because they are, in fact, recalcitrant opposites, one the negation of the other: slapstick comedy and tragedy” (55). A similarly schizophrenic logic is in operation in Arturo Ui, which can be expressed succinctly in two contradictory, mutually negating propositions:

\[ A = \text{Ui is ridiculous, and therefore harmless} \]
\[ B = \text{Ui is serious, and therefore harmful} \]

In a logically consistent world, \( A \) and \( B \) cannot be true at the same time. If Ui is ridiculous, and therefore harmless, then he cannot also be serious, because that would mean he is harmful – and vice versa. Of course, this model of comic disjunction and schizophrenic contradiction has much in common with Brecht’s conception of the Epic acting style, which aims to show “the inconsistencies which are to be found in the actions and characters of real people” (“Organum”, 195) by embodying those very inconsistencies in the form of conflicting propositions. Brecht’s son-in-law, Ekkehard Schall, sums up the situation in regards to his own performance as Arturo Ui: “Ui is a
petty bourgeois (for all I care, oppressed as well), or Ui is a gangster, or Ui is a mastermind, or Ui is a politician (for all I care, a demagogic one)” (79). While Schall’s description of Ui as a character might seem contradictory, it is nonetheless possible to imagine a gangster-politician, say, or a petty-bourgeois-mastermind, without being confronted with mutually exclusive propositions that are logically impossible. But in the world of Müller’s Arturo Ui (and arguably in the real world), things are neither logical nor consistent. Instead, Wuttke’s performance oscillates rapidly from ridiculous/harmless to serious/harmful and back again. Sometimes Ui even manages to be both at once, such as when he pulls back his shirt to bare his hairy chest at the audience like an angry gorilla.

This gesture is laughable, absurd in its incongruity; but it is also unsettling, as it manages to effectively convey the extent of Ui’s destructive, literally naked aggression. This doubled image, which represents Ui as simultaneously harmless and harmful, is profoundly ambivalent. What is the net effect of this kind of purposefully conflicted
dramaturgy on audiences? It is exceedingly hard to gauge, as is it intrinsically linked to issues of audience reception. In his discussion of black comedy, King argues that

the outer limits of the darkest comedy become particularly difficult to chart with any certainty because of the problem of varying subjective or group response. The more disturbing the disturbing element, it might be suggested, and the darker and more subdued the humour, the more variable and hard to predict the response might become. (190)

References to the Holocaust remain one of the most disturbing elements possible in the Western imagination, and as such provoke some of the most unpredictable audience reactions. Nonetheless, a general structural principle can be discerned in the operation of dark, contrapuntal comedies such as Müller’s Arturo Ui. King argues that this comedy of disrupted (dis)pleasure “leaves the [audience], unaided, to decide what to do, emotionally, with an acute mixture of tragic and comic resonances, neither of which cancels out the other” (196). This “combination [...] is hard to synthesise into any neat and disposable formula, and thus possesses more lingering disturbing impact” (193). According to Viano, witnessing such work is “uncanny and unsettling, potentially sickening and always disorienting, insofar as spectators are forced into a schizoid experience” (56). By encouraging audience members to feel comic pleasure, then disrupting this pleasure with unpleasant experiences, conflicted comedies purposefully provoke conflicted audience responses. I believe this is a conscious strategy that Müller deploys in Arturo Ui, in order to complicate and intensify the affective charge of Brecht’s script. Müller describes his “aesthetic of inundation” in the following interview excerpt:

I always have [...] the desire to burden the recipients with so much [information] that they don’t know which should be the first item to carry, and I believe that is the only option. The question is how do you achieve this in the theatre. [Not when] one thing is shown after another, which for Brecht was still a law. Today, one has to show as many points as possible so that people are forced to select [...] I believe the only way left to do it is by way of inundation. And I think it becomes rather boring if [...] the spectators always have time to calm down. You must always pull one thing into the other if both are to attain their effect. (163, italics mine.)

The acting lesson scene and the speech that directly follows it are an illustration of the power of this aesthetic of inundation and overload. In creating a disjunctive, schizophrenic experience, where “people are forced to select”, Müller’s comedy
demonstrably works to open up a productive ethical and political space, rather than merely advancing a predetermined ethical position. Some critics might respond that this reading of comedy’s function unfairly passes the burden of meaning-making from the author on to the audience; and that this amounts to an abdication of moral responsibility. I concede that this is a danger in non-didactic comedy. But while there is the potential for Müller’s production of *Arturo Ui* – or more precisely, my reading of it – to be accused of suffering from postmodern relativism, I argue that it is nonetheless indirectly instrumentalist, and intensely ethical. Schizophrenic comedy provokes individual audience members to establish their own ethical positions, experiencing for themselves where the boundary between humour and horror lies. If the show’s mixed messages leave audience members feeling confused, unsettled, and annoyed as well as amused, then these responses have the potential to inspire thought and discussion, in an attempt to reconcile the sense of conflict and disjunction. Comedy is particularly powerful in this regard because of its coded nature, which, as we have seen, allows it to “bribe the listener with his own gain in pleasure into taking our side without probing too far” (Freud, 100). As a result of this, people often laugh against their own better judgement. Critchley argues that “perhaps one laughs at jokes one would rather not laugh at. Humour can provide information about oneself that one would rather not have” (*On Humour*, 74). In these cases, humour has managed to draw your attention to an inconsistency, or hypocrisy, in your own world-view. This comedy is thus indirectly corrective, in that seemingly irresponsible jokes nonetheless serve responsible purposes, revealing conflicts that must be consciously addressed, or awkwardly repressed. In this sense, comedy can have an anti-cathartic as well as a cathartic effect – and can estrange audiences in a productive, ethically useful way.
Chapter Three
Laughing with Hitler: Mein Führer as comedy of forgiveness

The viewer empathises with Hitler and starts to lose distance, and this is creepy because you're not supposed to have such feelings for Hitler. Intuitively, the viewer tries to rid himself of his compassion, and it's exactly this tension that is enlightening.

– Dani Levy, 2006

Dani Levy’s 2006 feature film, Mein Führer, stands in contrast to Arturo Ui because of its perceived status as a comedy of forgiveness; this status is deeply problematic, however, as I will show. Levy’s film has an important thematic relationship to Arturo Ui, as it takes up Brecht’s examination of Hitler as an actor who needs specialised training to produce his oratorical effects. In this context, the entire plot of Mein Führer can be interpreted as an elaboration and re-working of Arturo Ui’s acting lesson scene, where the conceit of Hitler relying on a professional acting coach is now the basis for a feature length film. In Mein Führer, the acting coach is a Jewish man named Adolf Grünbaum (Ulrich Mühe), who is taken out of Sachsenhausen concentration camp to help Adolf Hitler (Helge Schneider) recover his “inner fire”. Grünbaum and Hitler’s shared first name is the first and most obvious sign of a “helpless commonality” (Wood, 3) that comes to exist between the two men. Both Levy and his critics have made comments that attest to the supposedly forgiving nature of Mein Führer. Most memorably, Harald Martenstein described Levy’s movie as “a major historical event, the first mainstream film since 1945 in which Hitler comes off as a regrettable but basically nice guy”, concluding wryly that “Dani Levy can’t have intended to be a Hitler-sympathiser, it happened by mistake”. With this statement in mind, Mein Führer can be examined productively as an apparent counter-text to Arturo Ui, although I argue that Levy’s film actually sheds light on the inter-relationships between corrective and forgiving comedy, and supports my thesis about the centrality of pleasure, displeasure and disruption in the operation of Hitler comedies.

While Levy is not (yet) regarded as a seminal artistic figure the way Brecht is, he is nonetheless regarded highly as a film-maker. Levy won the Ernst Lubitsch Prize in 2005 for Go For Zucker! (2004), an “unorthodox comedy” about Jewish life in Germany. Mein Führer was a box-office success following its release in Germany; and although it was not
released overseas, it did receive the “Freedom of Expression” award at the 2007 San Francisco Jewish Film Festival. German critics, on the other hand, were almost unanimously derisive of Levy’s film. *Spiegel Online* ran a review by Henryk Broder entitled “Dani Levy’s Failed Hitler Comedy”, while an article by David Crossland announced “Critics Pan Farce: Germany Not Amused by Hitler Comedy”. Three days later, the *New York Times*’s Mark Landler ran a story called “In Germany, a Hitler Comedy Goes Over with a Thud”. To date, *Mein Führer* has received very little extended critical attention; this makes it of particular relevance to my argument. Furthermore, *Mein Führer*’s predominantly negative reception shows that the problem of representing Hitler in comedy is not purely a historical concern, but an issue that continues to the present day.

Many of the English-language articles published about Levy’s Hitler comedy focus on the non-comic aspects of the film, such as Levy’s oppositional relationship to *Downfall* (2005) in particular, and the tradition of serious, cinematic realist representations of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust more generally (see Broder, Crossland, Haas). There has also been some discussion – and critique – of Levy’s reliance on the pop-psychoanalytic theories of Alice Miller, including her work *Adolf Hitler: How Could a Monster Succeed in Blinding a Nation?* (1998), which posits a causal relationship between Hitler’s abusive treatment as a child and his subsequent violent behaviour as an adult (see Martenstein). If the comic nature of *Mein Führer* is mentioned in these accounts, it is usually in relation to The Great Dictator, The Producers, or occasionally To Be or Not to Be. None of the English-language criticism of *Mein Führer*, however, has connected *Arturo Ui* and Levy’s film. (German-language media reports did make this connection; see Seibt, Zander.) Crossland’s assertion that “[a] German-made farce about Hitler would have been unthinkable just a few years ago” ignores Brecht’s historical gangster farce. This is a substantial oversight, especially given that in Berlin in early 2007, where *Mein Führer* opened and was filmed, *Arturo Ui* was the other major Hitler comedy on offer to general audiences. Considering that Levy has been living in Berlin since 1980, and working there as a theatre- and film-maker, it seems more than likely that he would have seen Müller’s production. In fact, my analysis will show that there are even some demonstrable references to Wuttke’s performance of Arturo Ui in Levy’s representation of Hitler.

I will work to rescue Levy’s comedy from the critics’ overwhelmingly negative responses. I will focus on the scenes from *Mein Führer* that most closely resemble the acting lesson
and “Murder! Extortion! Highway robbery!” speech from *Arturo Ui*, which I consider to be the most enjoyable sequences in the movie. Looking at Grünbaum’s abortive assassination attempt during an acting lesson, I will show that a sympathetic forgiving impulse is present, but also that this impulse is tempered and undermined by the presence of irresponsible slapstick comedy. In Hitler’s first acting lesson with Grünbaum, I will show how the irresponsible pleasure of slapstick is mobilised, then purposefully disrupted by traumatic out-of-field events, creating affects very similar to those in *Arturo Ui*. Finally, I will examine Hitler/Grünbaum’s climactic “truly truest truth” speech, showing how Levy’s directorial decisions work to mobilise conflicting emotional tones in a way that has parallels to Müller’s aesthetic of inundation. I argue that *Mein Führer* is purposefully conflicted, even schizophrenic in its dramaturgy, and that, as in *Arturo Ui*, this produces an experience which is indirectly corrective, and ethically productive.

Grünbaum’s assassination attempt

Grünbaum’s third acting lesson with Hitler, which occurs midway through *Mein Führer*, best serves to illustrate how even one of the most overtly forgiving moments of the film relies on complex, ambivalent comedic effects. In this scene, Grünbaum decides to overcome his fear and assassinate Hitler, even if it means certain death for himself and his family. As in a previous scene, Grünbaum makes Hitler go into a meditative state and carry out some visualisation exercises; Hitler closes his eyes obediently, and wobbles on the spot (his hand twitches in a parodic tribute to Bruno Ganz’s portrayal of Hitler in *Downfall*). Grünbaum’s acting exercises are a ruse this time, however. As Hitler relives a childhood beating, Grünbaum sneaks over to Hitler’s desk, looking for a weapon, and finds a gold brick. Grünbaum advances towards Hitler carrying the brick, then raises it above his head, preparing to smash Hitler’s skull.
This sequence is played in somewhat straight fashion, as in a contemporary Nazi-period thriller such as *The Counterfeiters* (2007) or *Valkyrie* (2008); the musical score is dramatic rather than comedic. At the same time, however, the gravitas of the scene is purposefully played off against its utter improbability and unreality, which aligns it more with slapstick. Grünbaum’s choice of weapon is also absurdly symbolic: it literalises Hitler’s anti-Semitic paranoia that “the Jews wield the gold” (Barta, “Discussion”). Just when Grünbaum is about to kill Hitler, Hitler’s counting of his beatings gives way to pitiful sobbing. In this crucial moment, Grünbaum feels sorry for Hitler, and is unable to dispatch him.
Grünbaum takes pity on Hitler [image removed for copyright reasons]

Grünbaum’s response to Hitler’s predicament is a literal expression of what Wood calls “forgiveness for those who don’t [deserve it]” (6); this is both amusing and immensely frustrating to watch. By representing Hitler-as-victim, Mein Führer thus creates a connection – a helpless commonality – between Hitler and Grünbaum, and potentially between Hitler and the audience. Levy’s decision to represent Hitler in such a (sym)pathetic way has proved to be one of the most controversial aspects of Mein Führer. In response, the Tagesspiegel critic writes:

should one be allowed to laugh about Hitler? Certainly. Should one be allowed to cry about him, to embrace him posthumously and comfort him for having had such a bad childhood? You can’t get more vulgar than that, but this is precisely the impulse mobilised by Mein Führer. (in Crossland)

This distinction is congruent with Wood’s assertion that “the comedy of correction may amuse us but it rarely moves us, because it does not intend to [...] whereas the comedy of forgiveness has as one of its aims the generation of sympathetic emotion” (9, italics mine). It is worth noting that critics are not offended by corrective jokes at Hitler’s
expense. Conversely, when Hitler is offered up as a tragic figure, worthy of pity as well as scorn, this is seen as unacceptable. For example, in *Welt am Sonntag* Peters argues that what’s particularly offensive [about *Mein Führer*] is that Adolf Hitler of all people is given quite *sympathetic character traits*. With an unfortunate mixture of naivety and dramaturgic inability and with *totally inappropriate empathy*, Levy has now managed to make these revealingly grotesque traits of Hitler human and understandable, so that one is left thinking: ‘Oh well, things weren’t always easy for Adolf Hitler either’. (in Crossland, italics mine)

Both the *Welt am Sonntag* and *Tagesspiegel* writers resent Levy’s attempts to make them empathise with Hitler. While this response might seem reasonable, even responsible, I argue that the critics’ outrage is in fact morally complacent. It is an effort to deny the full moral complexity of the situation, by relying on commonsense clichés. Levy’s comedy exposes a contradiction inherent in two banal moral propositions of everyday morality, which can be expressed as follows:

\[
C = \text{Hitler does not deserve sympathy}
\]

\[
D = \text{victims of child abuse do deserve sympathy}
\]

The propositions \(C\) and \(D\) both appear to be true; they also seem mutually exclusive. *Mein Führer*, however, dramatises a third proposition:

\[
E = \text{Hitler is a victim of child abuse}
\]

This proposition is empirically verifiable (see Kershaw, Miller). It is also very problematic for commonplace moral assumptions, as it seems to imply that \(C\) and \(D\) are simultaneously true – which is logically impossible. This conflicted representation, while “vulgar”, “offensive” and “totally inappropriate” to some German critics, is nonetheless worth taking seriously; it could even act as the catalyst for an interrogation of taken-for-granted everyday morality. Munro recognises this productive contradiction in his review of *Mein Fuhrer*, arguing that “the film brings the abstract violence of war down to a personal level. Most people would say they’d have killed Hitler given the chance. But when the hypothetical becomes reality, the actual murder of a fellow human isn’t easy”. Munro backs away from this awkward conclusion, however, by finishing his sentence with a banal piece of moralising: “… even when that human is a monster”. Munro’s confused response dramatises an inner conflict that Levy’s film has successfully provoked. Discussing the reception of partially comic anti-heroes such as *American
Psycho’s Patrick Bateman, and Natural Born Killers’ Mickey and Mallory Knox, King writes that “the fact that such allegiance is offered might help to explain the particularly virulent negative response of some critics, a response that might be interpreted as an effort to demonstrate (or to will) their distance from any such implication” (189). The same (un)critical effort is in operation here, with reviewers expressing distaste towards Levy, rather than engaging with the troubling conflicts his film raises. In the process, they ignore a more important and unresolved ethical question: how do you gauge the point where sympathy for childhood trauma (D) should give way to the unsympathetic punishment of adult behaviour (C)?

In this kind of morally charged discussion, it is all too easy to lose sight of the comic pleasure essential to this scene. The image of this moral crisis – a Jewish acting coach who desperately wants to kill Hitler, but finds himself unable to do so – is not just poignant and unsettling; it is also ridiculous, and enjoyable. Levy purposefully uses comedy to undermine the seriousness of Grünbaum’s conundrum. As Grünbaum stands clutching the gold brick, Hitler opens his eyes and asks Grünbaum: “What are you doing?” At this moment, the film lurches into slapstick mode again. Grünbaum stands with his arms behind his head and elbows sticking out, attempting to conceal the weapon behind his back. Grünbaum is thus abruptly re-positioned by Levy: from conscience-stricken Jewish man, to awkward-yet-dexterous clown.

Pathos is disrupted by slapstick [image removed for copyright reasons]
This is implausible, and comically enjoyable, to watch, while at the same time it extends the audience’s frustration. Levy’s physical comedy defuses the tension of the previous seconds, as the high-stakes question – “Will Grünbaum manage to kill Hitler?” – is replaced by a degraded, ridiculous question: “Will Grünbaum manage to hide a gold brick behind his back without Hitler noticing?” Grünbaum’s improbable sleight of hand also functions as a discursive sleight-of-hand, drawing audience members’ attention away from the weighty moral questions the film raised just moments earlier.

**Hitler in a tracksuit**

I would now like to shift attention to an earlier scene in *Mein Führer*, to show how Levy mobilises an intense sense of audience pleasure, only to purposefully disrupt it with distressing out-of-field references. This provokes a sense of compromised Zizekian enjoyment, similar to that in scenes from *Arturo Ui*. The moment when Hitler first agrees to take lessons from Grünbaum marks a shift in tone for *Mein Führer*, from restrained black comedy to exuberant farce. This shift is signalled by music, and a time-lapse cut to Hitler in an absurd mustard-yellow velour SS tracksuit, which bulges obscenely at the crotch.
This shift is liberating for audience members, who are temporarily freed from the burden of historical accuracy, and become able to further suspend their disbelief and relish the irresponsible pleasure of comedy. Peters notes that “Levy had plenty of material given that the real Hitler offered so much scope for humor with [...] the huge discrepancy between his own physique and the Nazi ideal of a blond, blue-eyed master race” (in Crossland). In his abrupt transition from serious uniform to ridiculous tracksuit, Hitler is effectively unmasked. Levy draws attention to Hitler’s fragility; his awkwardness and unfitness are revealed. In Freud’s terms, Levy’s critical unmasking “degrade[s] the dignity of an individual person by drawing attention to the frailty he shares with all human beings, but especially to the dependency of his mental achievements on bodily needs” (197). According to Freud, “the unmasking then becomes the equivalent of the admonition: this or that worthy [person], admired as a demi-god, is after all only a human being like you and me” (ibid). On one level, this is a corrective impulse; on the other hand, to say that Hitler is “a human being like you and me” offers the kind of forgiving helpless commonality that is deeply offensive to people who wish to maintain a permanent – and implicitly absolute – distance between themselves and Hitler’s “radical evil” (Fackenheim, in Rosenbaum, 6). In this way, the humanising aspect of Levy’s comic unmasking is profoundly ambivalent; forgiveness appears once more as correction’s repressed other.

When Grünbaum instructs Hitler to “shut your eyes, please”, Hitler responds pompously: “I’m not going to do that [...] I never shut my eyes out of principle. Not even when I sleep.” This is a patently ridiculous statement, both impractical and physically impossible. It reveals a necessary disjunction between Hitler’s professed ideals and his actual behaviour; in the process, Hitler is correctively unmasked once more, as delusional, brainwashed by his own hyperbolic rhetoric. This unmasking is extended by Hitler’s pseudo-explanation of his behaviour to Grünbaum: “Does the tiger close his eyes when he goes through the jungle? Does the soldier close his eyes in battle? No, he doesn’t. Otherwise he is a dead soldier.” (While Hitler’s remarks seem laughable when he utters them, ironically his paranoia turns out to be justified.) As with Ui’s acting lessons, here Levy’s Hitler comes to seem both pathetic and harmless; this is a pleasurable relief for audience members, who don’t need to feel threatened by the out-of-field atrocities that Hitler usually signifies. Just as in Arturo Ui, however, this sense of harmless banality is carefully established only to be purposefully disrupted. Buoyed by his success with the push-ups, Hitler starts shadow-boxing, once again revealing the discrepancy
between the Aryan ideal and Hitler’s own condition. Hitler asks Grünbaum if he has ever boxed:

Grünbaum: No, unfortunately not. Although, as a child I was often bullied. Five or six boys made a joke out of it, on my way home [from school].

Hitler: Why didn’t you defend yourself? Why don’t the Jews ever defend themselves? Why do they allow themselves to be deported without fighting back? Do you all have no courage? Are you too cowardly?

The sense of pleasurable disbelief and unreality is punctured by Hitler’s horrifically callous remarks, and the traumatic out-of-field reality of the Holocaust rushes into the picture. This effectively punishes the audience for taking Hitler so lightly, implicating one’s enjoyment in a complex mix of guilt and indirect responsibility.

Grünbaum’s revenge [image removed for copyright reasons]

At this moment, Grünbaum loses self-control and punches Hitler, lightly, in the face. Hitler collapses, unconscious. This is a classic slapstick gag, which “depend[s] on a rupture in the expected link between physical effort and result” (Dale, 4) – Grünbaum, who has never boxed, is unlikely to be able to deliver a knock-out blow. Given the
context, however, this gag is not necessarily very funny. As in Arturo Ui, this is as an instance of broken humour, where “humour is a means of obtaining pleasure in spite of the distressing affects that disturb it” (222), producing pleasure “that smiles in the midst of tears” (226) – or in the midst of anger. In this case, the distress caused to Grübaum (and, by extension, to the audience) by Hitler’s atrocious comments is partly blocked by Grübaum’s outburst – but only partly. Amusement following Hitler’s knock-out can come from a sense of satisfaction with this symbolic revenge on Hitler. At the same time, this laughter is potentially tempered by a sense of guilt, at making light of Hitler’s words, and therefore the plight of European Jewry. In this case, audience members experience Zizek’s enjoyment, where audience “pleasure involves a certain displeasure” (239). Levy purposefully creates a sense of ambiguity over how audience members should react to the meaning of the violence onscreen, which constantly fluctuates – from referencing the death camps, to representing Hitler as the butt of unrealistic physical gags, and back again. When Hitler recovers, his nose is not bleeding, or bruised in any way, which suggests a farcical, non-realistic slapstick modality. Directly after this scene, however, the film cuts to a shot of Grübaum being held and punched by SS guards in a realistic manner, until he is covered in realistic-looking bruises and blood. This constant undercutting and “wrong-footing the audience through sudden shifts of tone” (King, 181) creates complex, unstable effects on audience members. Levy’s comedy of forgiveness, often mediated through slapstick, is repeatedly undermined and complicated by reminders of the actual historical atrocities perpetrated by Hitler and the Nazis on European Jewry. But these reminders then in turn become the opportunity for further comedy that is necessarily a difficult combination of pleasure and displeasure.
Grünbaum speaks, as Hitler: ‘We have solved the Jewish problem …” [removed for copyright reasons]

**Hitler / Grünbaum’s ‘truly truest truth’ speech**

To complete this chapter, I will examine the climactic speech scene from *Mein Führer*, which is demonstrably forgiving, corrective, irresponsible – and thoroughly conflicted. In an arguably purposeful reference to Wuttke’s portrayal of Ui, Hitler loses his voice during an angry tirade and it is reduced to a sub-audible croak. This gag is the catalyst for Grünbaum’s final collaboration with Hitler. Moments before Hitler’s speech at the Lustgarten, Grünbaum is escorted at gunpoint to a microphone hidden under Hitler’s podium. Goebbels [Sylvester Groth] and Himmler [Ulrich Noethen] are planning to assassinate Hitler themselves, in a propaganda coup they will catch on film. Grünbaum finds himself in front of a microphone, sitting on a ticking bomb, with a mute Führer looking anxiously down at him through a hole in the floor. As Grünbaum speaks, under duress, Hitler has no choice but to lip-synch along to Grünbaum’s words, punctuating the speech with his usual dramatic hand movements. In the process, Hitler is literalised as a puppet.
Hitler as puppet [image removed for copyright reasons]

This can be interpreted as an example of corrective comedy, with Levy using slapstick in the service of corrective satire, to further expose the hollowness of Hitler's histrionic posturing – as in Scene Eight of *Arturo Ui*. Like the gold brick sequence, this scene is an absurdly literal evocation of anti-Semitic paranoia: in this case, the international Zionist conspiracy, where Jews are supposed to be “puppet-masters” of the world. (This scene is also potentially a reference to the numerous grotesquely comic Hitler-puppet scenes in Syberberg’s *Hitler, ein Film aus Germany* (1977). It could also refer to *Arturo Ui*, where at the end of Ui’s “Murder! Extortion! Highway robbery!” speech, he sits exhausted on Dogsborough’s lap like a puppet with its strings cut – though Muller might already be referencing Syberberg.) When Grünbaum gets to the point in the speech where Hitler boasts “we have solved the Jewish problem”, he refuses to continue reading. Grünbaum can no longer go along with events, even if non-compliance means certain death. Levy has stated that *Mein Führer* explores a “strong tension between belief, understanding and refusal” (in Haas); this is a moment where Grünbaum’s understanding of Hitler’s situation provokes not forgiveness but defiance. When Grünbaum finally does speak
again, his speech functions as a small counter-factual fantasy moment, self-consciously similar to Chaplin’s final speech in *The Great Dictator*. Grünbaum seizes the chance to play Hitler as he really is, i.e. to tell the crowd Hitler’s “truly truest truth”:

I thank you.
It is true and German that you have followed me in turning the world into sauerkraut. Today our beloved Fatherland lies in soot and ashes.
You are all Aryan, blond-arsed (*arschblond*) and blue-eyed except me, and despite this you cheer for me. Hail me. (*Heil mich*).

*Cheers from crowd*
Why do you do that? I am a bed-wetter, a drug addict, I can’t get an erection. I was beaten by my father so often that I have lost my ability to have feelings for others. And so I torture the worthless, as I was tortured when I was worthless. I avenge myself on the Jews, the gays, and the sick people of the whole of Europe, for the torment and humiliation I suffered in my childhood room. Every unloved, hate-filled wiener (*Würstchen*) can conquer the world, when he—

*Grünbaum is shot in the head and chest.*

... Heal ... yourselves. (*Heilen ... Sie sich.*)

*Grünbaum dies.*

CROWD: Heal ourselves! Heal ourselves! (trans. Alex Finkle)

The elevated style of Hitler’s oratory is wonderfully incongruous when used to discuss the sad, but banal, details of Hitler’s private life; Grünbaum gets particular pleasure out of declaring, in the grand style, “I can’t get an erection”. Regardless of the historical accuracy of Grünbaum’s remarks, it is a fact that Hitler stage-managed his own image. He released almost no biographical details to public view, because they would have detracted from the carefully cultivated Führer-myth. On one level, then, Grünbaum’s speech is an example of corrective Freudian unmasking. At the same time, the speech is also forgiving, in that it encourages a degree of sympathy for Hitler, whose failings are ordinary rather than evil – and all too common.

If Levy’s only goal was to make audience members laugh, the most effective way to portray this scene would have been to keep the camera focused on Hitler, as he struggles to maintain the illusion that he is speaking rather than miming. This would build a sense of comic tension, especially during Grünbaum’s long pause, and during Grünbaum’s re-authoring of the speech, within which Hitler is hopelessly at sea. As Grünbaum deviates
from the rehearsed script, Hitler is forced to lip-synch in an ad hoc, improvised manner. This produces a manic, amateur effect, like a badly dubbed kung-fu film – the opposite of Hitler’s intended grand style. There is the double-incongruity of Hitler’s voice (i.e. Grünbaum) confessing things against Hitler’s will, and of Hitler’s physical presence still struggling to synchronise itself with these unwanted admissions, to avoid giving the game away. Hitler’s actions are farcical, and thus are very comic; this comic force conflicts directly with the seriousness of Grünbaum’s words, and the overall gravity of the situation. If the audience primarily laughs at Hitler’s slapstick struggle to lip-synch, this distracts from the pathos of Grünbaum’s words, preventing a more forgiving sympathy for Hitler’s dysfunctionality. Instead, however, and in keeping with the overall method of the film, Levy chooses to juxtapose conflicting comic and non-comic modes. As the scene plays out, Levy cuts between four different locations: Grünbaum speaking from beneath the podium; Hitler on the podium, gesturing ineffectually; crowds (including historical footage) listening to Grünbaum’s words and feeling sorry for Hitler; and Speer, Goebbels and Himmler, increasingly anxious at this unforseen turn of events. In this way, differing tonal modalities literally “jostle for screen space” (Elley). The sympathetic-crowd shots function in the modality of comedy of forgiveness, bordering on (melodrama, where, if we take Hitler’s predicament seriously, “our amusement turns to pity” (Martenstein). Finally, the disgruntled Nazi officials are presented in the manner of a serious Nazi-era thriller.

Goebbels and Himmler are not amused by Hitler’s performance [image removed for copyright reasons]
Levy’s choice of quick edits between locations is itself more consistent with dramatic action than with comedy. The pleasurable implausibility of Hitler as deranged live-action sock-puppet is countered by Goebbels and Himmler’s realistic and convincing concern about their assassination attempt. Whenever the film cuts back to Hitler, however, the whole scenario once again seems ridiculous; implausible and amusing. This disturbance of modes is maintained right until the end: Grünbaum is shot repeatedly for ruining Hitler’s speech, in possibly the most serious moment in the film. Moments after this, Hitler becomes aware of the ticking bomb, and runs from the podium, which explodes in an unrealistic spray of kindling; a farcical anticlimax which fails to kill Hitler.

This scene encapsulates the aesthetic strategy that runs throughout Mein Führer as a whole. Levy has said that “it was always my intention that the movie be a tragedy and a comedy,” (in Landler, italics mine). Levy’s attempt to have it both ways is not necessarily successful; some critics argue it produces an effect which is not comic, or tragic, or thrilling. “For Dani Levy, Hitler should be both realistic and funny,” Martenstein writes. “That’s the main problem with Mein Führer: the two Hitlers, the crude comic H. and the educational film H. are constantly clashing because Levy can’t decide between them. This makes the film mainly bizarre and only funny in parts.” But while Martenstein sees Mein Führer’s constantly clashing elements as bizarre and therefore not funny, I see this as a strategy congruent with Levy’s hope that “the viewer empathises with Hitler and starts to lose distance, and this is creepy because you’re not supposed to have such feelings for Hitler. Intuitively, the viewer tries to rid himself of his compassion, and it’s exactly this tension that is enlightening” (in Haas). Not all critics share Levy’s sentiments; Crossland argues that Levy’s “film falls to pieces – into an absurd part that isn’t absurd enough and a moral part that is too moral” (“Germany Not Amused”), when instead according to Die Welt it “should have been much nastier, more offensive and more shameless” (in Young). Derek Elley writes that the film’s “boldest idea is reserved for the final reels, as a last-minute development puts Grünbaum in the hot seat. But once again, Levy’s script pulls its punches, larding the surreal comedy with more heartfelt drama”.

It is interesting to note an apparent contradiction in these responses: while some critics find fault with Mein Führer for its offensively irresponsible portrayal of Hitler, others seem to wish the film was more irresponsible, and even more offensive. I propose that these divergent opinions are the signs of a healthy critical discourse, and represent the borders of a discursive space around the broader question of how Hitler should be represented, and what that means. Levy argues that “[t]he dusty educational approach
[to history] doesn’t really keep your attention for what was beneath the surface. Comedy is a good way to stir people, to confuse their emotions. And to provoke them. They’ll laugh and then be shocked at themselves for laughing” (“Time For Germany”). Munro sees *Mein Führer* in these terms, arguing that it is “rattling and bizarre […] a provocative, dissonant film that waltzes along to its own absurdist tempo” (“Absurdist fantasy”). In this context, *Mein Führer’s* avowedly bizarre nature can be recuperated as a productive form of tension, which creates humour that is disruptive, broken, compromised, uneasy and confronting.

![Broken humour: smiles in the midst of tears](image_removed_for_copyright_reasons)

What is most interesting about *Mein Führer* is how it mobilises pleasure and displeasure; how it creates conflicted, aesthetically schizophrenic responses. This produces what I see as a kind of indirect instrumentalism, where correction is an open-ended process within which the audience might engage. It is not so important what great truths Levy knows about Hitler, and whether he manages to communicate them unscathed to a passive audience. What is important is how the indirect, coded form of
comedy raises questions and encourages – provokes – individual audience members to make sense of Mein Führer’s mixed messages. Levy argues that

People were confused [by Mein Führer], and for me that confusion was always productive [...] films don’t need the right judgment. They can be controversial, that doesn’t mean they are bad. They can be confusing, that doesn’t mean they are not funny [...] movies can be very anarchistic, and combine all kinds of different energies, which makes them even more interesting and challenging and powerful. (in Peltner)

In this context it is worth quoting Purvis’s response to Mein Führer: “I laughed twice during the film, and felt a bit uneasy doing so”. While such a reserved reaction could be interpreted as a sign of Levy’s failure as a comedic film-maker, Purvis’ “uneasy” laughter is also arguably a sign of a productively conflicted response. This (admittedly sympathetic) interpretation corresponds with Critchley’s conclusion that “the best humour is not simply funny; it is troubling” (“Humour Noir”). The San Francisco Jewish Film Festival’s website, which claims that Levy’s film works to “catalyse necessary public conversations” as part of “an attempt to establish a cultural dialogue within a vast silence”. Audience members’ individual responses to Levy’s humour are thus the beginning of a process, not the end. The thoughts, reflections, conversations and arguments that ensue are signs of the comedy’s lasting value.
Conclusion

*Arturo Ui* and *Mein Führer* as comedies of disruption

My close examination of key scenes from *Arturo Ui* and *Mein Führer* illustrates the need for comedy theory to be responsive to the specific and complex realities of actual comedic practice. James Wood’s opposing categories of correction and forgiveness offer a simple and effective way of mobilising some of the distinctions implicit in Freud’s work on laughter, joking and humour. These categories, however, are unable to account for the complex mechanisms of Hitler comedy presented as theatre or film, where the live – or at least durational – experience creates much more ambivalent affects. I have shown that forgiveness often appears as correction’s repressed other: in *Arturo Ui*, as admiration for Wuttke’s acting skills; and in *Mein Führer*, as a helpless commonality with Hitler’s banal dysfunctionality. I have also shown that the destabilising operation of slapstick – which is pleasurable, unrealistic and often irresponsible – constantly disrupts any simply corrective or forgiving readings of *Arturo Ui* or *Mein Führer*. In an attempt to comprehend and resolve these inconsistencies, I have advanced a more complex theory of Hitler comedy that moves beyond reductive instrumentalism, and in which the disruption of pleasure with displeasure, and vice versa, is central to the work. In this new view, the purposeful generation of ambivalent, conflicted audience responses is both an inevitable and admirable goal of Hitler comedies. Critchley has said: “I want to believe that humour has a positive political function, but the historical register would suggest otherwise. I think its real power is enabling human beings to cognitively reflect on their situation, and imagine how that situation may be transformed. It [humour] can lead into something else” (“Humour Noir”). My re-conceptualisation of the function – the “real power” – of comedy is in line with Critchley’s position. I argue that, when combined with strategic references to traumatic events such as the Third Reich and the Holocaust, Hitler comedy that is otherwise irresponsible can provoke audience members to make responsible judgements about what they witness, and about their relationship to these events. This suggests a more nuanced conceptualisation of the function of comedy, which moves away from authorial intention, towards a more process-based model, where the contradictory impressions gathered from the work function as a catalyst for productive social discussions.
My reading of key scenes from Muller and Levy’s works suggests the exploitation of a kind of schizoid dialectic, where thesis plus antithesis does not add up to a coherent synthesis of correction or forgiveness, so much as to a pleasurable and conflicted movement between the two. The collision of pleasure and pain makes the jokes funnier, and the serious moments more serious. Wright argues that

it’s perfectly possible to be dripping with pity, then to laugh at a crude joke and finally to return to an image of even greater despair than we had before [...] as an audience, we welcome this emotional agility. We’re energised by the contrasts, and when we experience them, we’re more active, more engaged and the entire event is more credible. (11)

Wright’s comment is related to Peter Brook’s celebration of the contrapuntal nature of Shakespeare’s dramaturgy: “it is through the unreconciled opposition of Rough and Holy, through an atonal screech of absolutely unsympathetic keys that we get the disturbing and unforgettable impression of his plays. It is because the contradictions are so strong that they burn on us so deeply” (*The Empty Space*, 96). Similarly, in their best and most powerful moments, purposefully irresponsible Hitler comedies such as *Arturo Ui* and *Mein Führer* oscillate wildly from funny to serious, ridiculous to horrific, political to superficial, and back again. Robert Scholes celebrates this productive style of comedy, which “offers us moral stimulation – not fixed ethical positions which we can complacently assume” (162). Rather than insisting upon predetermined moral conclusions, then, comedy can instead open up a productive discursive space, which confronts the ideological and ethical. Within this space, extremes of responsibility and irresponsibility, of morality, immorality and amorality can be represented. Faced with these diverging perspectives, individual audience members have to establish their own ethical position/s, re-evaluating what they think is acceptable and what is not, in light of what they actually find funny, whether or not they consciously want to.

The questions that *Arturo Ui* raises about Wuttke-Ui-Hitler’s power as a performer are incredibly complex, not reducible to simple corrective formulas. Similarly, the questions that *Mein Führer* raises about the pathetic and banal nature of Hitler’s evil are very hard – perhaps impossible – to resolve. This is not a fault of the comedy; rather, it is a reflection of the enduring complexity of these issues, which have obsessed artists and scholars for more than half a century, and which are no closer to being settled. As Ian Kershaw writes in his Preface to *Hitler 1889-1936: Hubris* (1998), “the legacy of Hitler
belongs to all of us. Part of that duty is to seek understanding of how Hitler was possible. Only through history can we learn for the future. And no part of history is more important in that respect than the era dominated by Adolf Hitler” (xiv). By focusing on specific aspects of Hitler’s personality, Levy and Müller’s Hitler comedies both contribute to this ongoing investigation, without suggesting any easy answers. Luigi Pirandello argues that “an audience could, and should, be drawn, repelled, and drawn again, the gap closed, opened and closed again” (in Styan, The Dark Comedy, 47-48). In the case of comedies about Hitler, this disruptive operation of attraction and repulsion is particularly problematic – and particularly valuable. In this context, Arturo Ui and Mein Führer arguably deploy comedy instrumentally, in that they play with their audience’s senses of empathy and propriety, “encourage[ing] us to laugh and cry” (King, 196) – and to talk, and think. I hold that the co-existence of conflicting emotional and intellectual responses leads to a heightened audience experience, during, and hopefully after, the viewing of the work. This at-times schizophrenic comedy does not make light of human suffering; on the contrary, it makes dark humour of it, which is simultaneously pleasurable and disturbing. At its best, then, Hitler comedy can heighten both the pleasure and the pain that audience members experience.

As a final note, I would like to consider how contemporary Hitler comedies might be able to continue supplying cognitive dissonance, moral stimulation and guilty pleasure to new generations of audiences. In “Adolf on the Couch” (2007), Martenstein writes that

as long as an artist doesn’t celebrate Hitler, he or she can do pretty much whatever they want with him; in the last few years, ambiguous plays on the Hitler aesthetic have become popular [...] Hitler and his crimes, as events of the century, are going to be the objects of entertainment for centuries to come, like Emperor Nero or Vlad Dracul the Impaler.

If holding Hitler in high esteem is currently “the final taboo” (Kretzenbacher), this suggests that “much nastier, more offensive and more shameless” (Die Welt, in Young) comedy might aim to breach – to disrupt – this taboo. This would mean, among other things, finding ways to ambiguously “celebrate Hitler”. This could include representing Hitler as a sympathetic, forgivable human; and depicting him as an attractive, charismatic performer. Starting where Arturo Ui and Mein Führer left off, this is where Hitlerhoff stages its ambivalent, conflicted, pleasurably disturbing intervention.
Coda

Quentin Tarantino’s Inglourious Basterds

As a final note, it would be remiss not to mention Quentin Tarantino’s Inglourious Basterds (2009; henceforth referred to as Basterds), released just after I completed this dissertation. As well as its broader thematic resonance as a Hitler film inflected with comic elements, Basterds has some striking connections to both Arturo Ui and Mein Führer at the levels of casting and intertextuality. Most significantly, Tarantino casts Martin Wuttke as Hitler – Wuttke’s performance is remarkably similar to his depiction of Arturo Ui at the Berliner Ensemble – and Sylvester Groth as Goebbels – again, Groth’s representation of Goebbels is almost identical to his portrayal of Goebbels in Mein Führer. To date, no one in the English-language press has noted this audacious intertextuality/directorial plagiarism. O’Hehir has noted the “Mel Brooks-style portrayals of Hitler and Goebbels” (salon.com) in Basterds, without acknowledging the more direct stylistic debt to Levy and Müller. There is a complex tension between correction, revenge and irresponsibility in Tarantino’s film, which shows once again that corrective comedic tendencies are at times reinforced, at times undercut by competing impulses. In relation to this dissertation, it is particularly interesting to note that Hitler is represented as evil/other, yet when the “Basterds” take revenge on Hitler by killing him, this implicitly aligns the audience with a distinctly Hitler-like perspective.

Towards the climax of Basterds, Hitler is shown sitting in a cinema next to Goebbels, watching Goebbels’ latest propaganda film, Nation’s Pride. Hitler laughs wickedly at the deaths depicted onscreen. His pleasure at the spectacle of bloodshed signifies his callous disregard for human life, and is further confirmation, a symptom, of his evil nature. Audience members are encouraged to respond to Hitler’s actions in the terms of corrective comedy – through revulsion and differentiation. If Hitler is enjoying the film, this is a clear sign that audience members should not enjoy it. This straightforward opposition between (morally upright) audience and (immoral) Hitler breaks down at the moment of Hitler’s death, however. Two members of the “Basterds”, Sergeant Donny Donowitz (Eli Roth) and Private Omar Ulmer (Omar Doom), storm the cinema and graphically execute Hitler and Goebbels with machine-guns, while Nation’s Pride continues to play onscreen. Once Hitler is dead, Donowitz shoots him repeatedly in the face until his whole head breaks apart. This has been interpreted as a straightforward revenge fantasy; Goldberg writes that “Tarantino brings about the end of World War II.
in a way that would please Jews, and most everyone else” (1). Eli Roth goes further, describing the film as “one of the most satisfying, orgasmic things I’ve done in my life. It’s kosher porn” (reelzchannel.com). There is a potential sense of poetic justice here, since Hitler is killed just after he has laughed heartlessly at the deaths of others. The scene can be read as a form of corrective comedy where Hitler gets what’s coming to him, ostensibly intended to enforce the distinction between “bad” Nazis and “good” non-Nazis. Basterds’ producer, Lawrence Bender, argues that “at the end of the day, the people in that auditorium are Nazis. You kind of feel bad for them […] but you’re not feeling too much sympathy” (in Goldberg, 2, italics mine). I argue that this lack of sympathy for Hitler as a human being actually causes a kind of “short-circuit” in audience members’ own interpretive positions. People are able to watch Hitler’s stylised, gratuitously violent death from the detached comfort of a movie theatre, and are encouraged to derive pleasure from this violence. In the process, audience members are unwittingly, but necessarily, implicated in a process of unsympathetic cruelty analogous to Hitler’s. This can be expressed in a syllogistic breakdown:

\[ F = \text{Hitler takes pleasure in the suffering of others, therefore he is evil} \]
\[ G = \text{I take pleasure in the suffering of others (Hitler), therefore ... ?} \]

I propose that this scene, exactly like Wood’s description of a forgiving joke, “seems at first to assert a superiority [of audience members over Hitler], only, on closer inspection, to offer a helpless commonality” (3). The ability to differentiate yourself from the object of your hatred is thus effectively short-circuited, because the only way to enjoy Hitler’s bloody demise is to stoop to Hitler’s level. Whether or not this “helpless commonality” between Hitler-as-laughing-audience-member and actual laughing audience members is consciously apprehended, it remains a powerfully disruptive operation. In his article “Inglourious Basterds: When Jews Attack”, Daniel Mendelsohn is wary of “the visceral pleasure of revenge” (1) offered by Tarantino’s film, and unsettled by the spectacle of “audiences cheering for a revenge that turns Jews into carboncopies [sic] of Nazis, that makes Jews into ‘sickening’ perpetrators” (ibid). For Mendelsohn, the overall experience should leave one “horrified” rather than “cheering” (ibid). I would modify Mendelsohn’s claim, arguing that Basterds encourages audience members to feel intense pleasure, and to potentially feel horrified by this pleasure. This is a powerful, unsettling, and ultimately productive set of emotions to mobilise; it provokes a complex question to which there isn’t – and should not be – any easy answers.
Author Statement
From Hitler comedy to Hitlerhoff

You can certainly employ empathy. I use it when I want to lure the audience onto the wrong track; I seduce them with a true passion and abandon them at precisely the moment when they have accepted the sympathy or antipathy of which – viewed objectively – they should actually be ashamed.
– Ekkehard Schall

I had a sore stomach afterwards from laughing and yet also felt a bit queasy.
– Lana Knapp

It remains to link my critical discussion of comedy theory and Hitler-comedy, with the creative component of my thesis: Hitlerhoff. To begin with, I will briefly discuss the genesis of this potentially baffling comedy project, and show how the specific development of Hitlerhoff influenced my broader theories about the disruptive dis/pleasures that contemporary comedy can inspire within audiences. Following this, I will outline some of the key characteristics of Hitlerhoff as a theatre/video work, to facilitate a better engagement with the script and DVD recording. Hitlerhoff addresses my central research question: What are the implications of using comedy to represent Hitler, sixty-four years after Hitler’s death? More specifically, what are the implications of representing Hitler comically as a performer, who consciously acts as “Der Führer”?

The development of Hitlerhoff mirrors the structure of my dissertation: I began thinking about Hitlerhoff as a corrective satire, with a didactic, instrumentalist attitude towards its source material (both David Hasselhoff and Adolf Hitler). As the researching and writing developed, however, I moved away from these corrective intentions; I became increasingly preoccupied with the implications of constructing Hitlerhoff as a sympathetic, forgivable character – as an ambivalent anti-hero, who produces a conflicted Zizekian enjoyment in audience members. At the same time, which is to say constantly, there was a concomitant desire to produce as much comedic pleasure as possible from Hitlerhoff’s premise. This manifested itself in all manner of jokes and gags and references which had little or no relevance to my instrumentalist agendas of correction/ forgiveness. Hitlerhoff’s irresponsible comedy was magnified by the process of developing the play script for live performance at the 2008 Melbourne Fringe festival and 2009 Adelaide Fringe festival. The addition of performative elements – such as actors, video sequences, sound effects, costumes and props – often overwrote my
original intentions, in ways that were pleasurable and irresponsible, but not always coherent. The presence of live, sometimes inebriated, audiences in licensed theatre venues, and the effect of their shared laughter, also unavoidably affected the overall reception and interpretation of Hitlerhoff’s message/s – or perceived lack thereof. The wildly divergent responses to Hitlerhoff from reviewers and the general public (Appendix ii) influenced my argument that the actual experience of comedy breaks down any predetermined instrumentalist intentions. This is inevitable, given that comedy is an indirect, non-didactic art form, which relies so heavily on the production of pleasure. Comedy’s disruptive power can nonetheless function as a potent catalyst for productive social discussions, even – and especially – if it doesn’t simply communicate a “closed”, predetermined ethical/political message.

Why Hitler? Why Hoff? Why now?
The premise for Hitlerhoff first occurred to me in April 2006. I wanted to use comedy for corrective purposes, to ridicule not Hitler but David Hasselhoff, who at that time was an ironic spam-email phenomenon, the most googled man on the planet (see jam.canoe.ca), who appeared in a Pipex ad campaign as “the King of the Internet”. “The Hoff” was planning a world tour, starting in Australia, where he was bafflingly huge. I learnt that Hasselhoff was also planning a musical based on his own life story; I wanted to beat him to it, with my own caustic satirical version. Starting from this seemingly simple corrective premise, I soon realised that Hasselhoff – appearing in interviews across the world wearing “Don’t Hassel [sic] the Hoff” T-shirts – was already a walking self-parody. He was all too aware of his own ridiculousness – in fact, he was consciously exploiting his abject post-celebrity status for ironic sub-cultural credibility, and financial gain. In a parodic review of a non-existent cultural studies book entitled Californication and Cultural Imperialism: Baywatch and the Creation of World Culture (2000), Lavery argues that “it should not surprise us that in the age of the death of irony the real thing and the parody of it have merged” (5). Hasselhoff embodies this strange cultural moment. Susan Sontag’s 1964 comment from “Notes on Camp”, that “the traditional means for going beyond straight seriousness – irony, satire – seem feeble today, inadequate to the culturally oversaturated medium in which contemporary sensibility is schooled” (116) is more relevant than ever in the twenty-first century. To really intervene in the myth of Hasselhoff, I reasoned, it was necessary to go beyond irony, beyond satire, by doing something really strange; something extreme. After spending weeks trying to
come up with a pun on “Hoff” that was funnier and more horrible than “Bravehoff”, “Smirnhoff”, or “Beef Stroganhoff”, the phrase “Hitlerhoff” came to me. It came to stay.

As a title, “Hitlerhoff” functions as a three-syllable joke; in fact, it corresponds precisely with one of Freud’s definitions of “the technique of the joke” in *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious*. “[W]e can describe the process of joke-formation,” Freud writes, “as one of **condensation with substitute-formation**, that is […] the formation of a substitute consists of producing a *composite word*” (14) – i.e. Hitler+Hoff. But what exactly does “Hitlerhoff” mean – is it a harmless joke; a political statement; an unforgivable outrage; or something else entirely? According to Heymans, “the effect of a joke comes about by the sequence first of bafflement and then of light dawning” (in Freud, 6); this is the effect that I aimed to produce with the premise of my show. Part of the appeal of this purposefully confusing and provocative “mash-up” lies in its apparent arbitrariness – after all, what could the banal, mediocre star of *Knight Rider* and *Baywatch* possibly have in common with Hitler, the man responsible for World War Two and the Holocaust? The phrase suggests a hidden unity, and invites you to search for potential commonalities. Brecht’s *Arturo Ui* poses the (loaded) question of a connection between Al Capone and Hitler. Brecht’s answer is that Capone and Hitler were both gangsters. Similarly, *Hitlerhoff* poses a potentially baffling question: what are the connections between David Hasselhoff and Hitler? My answer is that they both are/were famous performers, whose dream vision of a perfect world populated by fit, healthy, beautiful Aryans are disturbingly similar.

In their own ways, Hitler and Hasselhoff have both been successful on a scale the world had never seen before, and has never seen since. (The significance of this “success” is, of course, highly problematic – and the dramatic core of my show.) While it is easy to watch old archival footage of Hitler’s speeches with seven decades of hindsight and laugh at his histrionic gestures and ridiculous speech patterns, it is important to remember that all of those gestures were carefully constructed for maximum rhetorical effect upon an early twentieth-century German audience – and they were remarkably effective. Hitler is regarded by many commentators as, among other things, “undoubtedly the greatest speaker of the [twentieth] century” (MacArthur, xvi). For a time in the 1930s and 1940s, Hitler was the most famous person in the world; this status is ambivalently recognised by *Time* magazine, who declared that he “without doubt became 1938’s Man of the Year” after he had annexed Austria and Sudetenland and “torn the Treaty of Versailles to shreds” (*Time*). Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*, the propaganda film that best
captures Hitler’s inflammatory talents, is one of the most notorious, influential and recognisable pieces of cinema ever made.

Conversely, while the causes (and effects) of Hasselhoff’s fame couldn’t be more different, its magnitude is comparable. According to The Guinness Book of World Records, “the most watched actor on TV is David Hasslehoff, star of [The Young and the Restless,] Knight Rider and Baywatch. In 1996 he was seen by an estimated weekly audience of more than 1.1 billion in 142 countries” (in Hasselhoff, iii). For a brief period at the end of the 1980s, Hasselhoff was one of the biggest stars in the world; Lavery writes that “overseas, especially in Europe, he is a music superstar as well, a second Elvis” (2). “Looking for Freedom”, Hasselhoff’s English-language cover of “Auf der Straße nach Süden” (originally performed in 1978 by Tony Marshall), was a Number One hit in West Germany, Switzerland and Austria between March and May 1989, and became the unofficial anthem for the reunification of Germany. Even before Baywatch, Hasselhoff embodied the capitalist fantasy of the Californian “good life” – fast cars, beautiful women – for millions of Europeans who were ready for the end of communism. This was underlined symbolically, and absurdly, by a concert on New Year’s Eve 1989/90, where Hasselhoff sang on the remains of the Berlin Wall to an estimated crowd of 500,000 Germans (Hartley, 37) – the largest mass celebration in Germany since Hitler’s Nazi rallies. Baywatch “is the most popular [TV] show in the history of the medium” (Lavery). Images and sound from Baywatch and Knight Rider – particularly their opening credits – have become, like Triumph of the Will, some of the most iconic sequences in modern image-culture. In 1997, Lavery identified Hasselhoff as “one of the best known [sic] individuals on the face of the earth”, “right up there with Michael Jackson, Schwarzenegger, Bill Clinton” (2).

While Hasselhoff is unlikely to become Time’s Man of the Year, his ubiquity is objective proof of his popularity, if not his talent. In fact, over the past five years a campy “ironic” appreciation of the Hoff, based precisely on his lack of talent – combined with a mocking awareness of Hasselhoff’s once-colossal popularity in undiscerning nations – has made him “ironically” popular in non-German speaking countries. In 2006, the act of “Hoffing” – electronically superimposing David Hasselhoff’s face onto an image and emailing it to people who don’t wish to receive such images, usually for comic effect – passed into common vernacular, becoming for a time a verb arguably as recognisable as “googling” or “spamming”: “To be Hoffed – to be sent homoerotic images of David Hasselhoff in questionable outfits/poses with various props/animals.”
(www.urbandictionary.com). In fact, along with LOLcats, “Hoffing” has become one of the biggest image-doctoring phenomena since the Toothbrush moustache-based *reductio ad Hitlerum*.

*Before being “Hoffed” [image removed for copyright reasons] After being “Hoffed”*

**Hitlerhoff as a comedy of correction**

This seemed like a sufficiently amusing – and unsettling – premise around which to build a comedy show. By combining these two images, I was simultaneously committing *reductio ad Hitlerum* on Hasselhoff, and “Hoffing” Hitler – a hilarious double gesture, which was immensely pleasurable. This juxtaposition also seemed potentially instructive: by conflating a TV star with a fascist dictator, it seemed possible to destabilise the status of “Hasselhoff” as a signifier, thereby critiquing Hasselhoff’s banal lack of talent, and the banality of a society that nonetheless celebrated him. Guy Debord argues that “by means of the spectacle the ruling order discourses endlessly upon itself in an uninterrupted monologue of self-praise” (19); *Hitlerhoff* would literally embody this idea of an endless egotistical monologue. In this way, the show could implicitly attack contemporary US values, which are responsible for *Baywatch* – and George W. Bush’s “War on Terror”. *Hitlerhoff* could therefore invert Hannah Arendt’s famous formulation, revealing the evil of banality within US popular culture, as a critique of “cultural imperialism, the hegemonic colonization under world capitalism of other cultures by dominant cultures like that of the United States” (Lavery, 1). For example, juxtaposing footage of the blond, blue-eyed lifeguards of *Baywatch* with remarkably similar images from Riefenstahl’s *Olympia* (1937) is a way to question the (implicitly Aryan?) nature of the USA’s beauty ideals, and raise a question posed by Lavery, albeit ironically: “what
As I began to research the *Hitlerhoff* script, this clearly identifiable, corrective, instrumentalist impulse became increasingly refracted. Firstly, I became wary of producing an overly reductive didactic critique of American society. The danger of such an approach was articulated by Polish intellectual Czeslaw Milosz in *The Captive Mind* (1951). The propaganda to which a citizen of newly communist Eastern Europe is subjected, Milosz argues, “tries by every means to prove that Nazism and Americanism are identical [...] He believes this propaganda only slightly less than the average American believes the journalists who assure him that Hitlerism and Stalinism are one and the same” (31, italics mine). The fact that my initial *reductio ad Hitlerum* impulse was uncomfortably similar to techniques employed by both Stalinist and McCarthyist governments in the 1950s made me re-think my own strategies. I became determined to produce something more subtle, and less didactic. At the same time, *Hitlerhoff* began to function like many of the Hitler-comedies mentioned in my introduction. By pairing Hitler with someone less serious, *Hitlerhoff* automatically served to degrade and demystify the Führer; to “take away from [Hitler] the holy seriousness that always surrounded him and protected him like a cordon” (Brooks, in Beier). While this was not my original intention, it became an inescapable part of the project, especially as I consumed, and enjoyed, all the Hitler comedy currently available. For Freud, parody and travesty “bring about the degradation of the sublime [...] by destroying the unity existing between the public character of a personage and his words and actions, replacing either the sublime personage or his utterances with low substitutes” (196). In this context, Hasselhoff, with his red Speedos and platitudes and embarrassing drunken consumption of cheeseburgers, is an assuredly “low substitute” for Hitler’s high-flown rhetoric. While this degradation of Hitler still conflates Nazism and Americanism, it does so in as a *reduction ad Hoffum*, not a *reductio ad Hitlerum*: it potentially renders Nazism harmless, rather than “revealing” the danger of Americanism.

**Hitlerhoff as a comedy of forgiveness**

The other major shift in my objectives came as I researched the project. In generating the script, my compositional strategy was to familiarise myself with the life stories of Hitler and Hasselhoff, and to look for points of equivalence. There were some striking and surprising similarities. Most remarkably, both Hasselhoff and Hitler dreamed of becoming great artists. Hasselhoff wanted to be a Broadway star; Hitler wanted to be a
great painter, and later was determined to be a great architect. Both aspiring artists, however, suffered traumatic rejections from the art schools of their respective dreams. Hasselhoff was not accepted by the Juilliard School in New York (Hasselhoff, 30-31), while Hitler was rejected, twice, by the Viennese Academy of Fine Arts (Hitler, 18-19; Kershaw notes that Hitler only mentions the first rejection in Mein Kampf [24]). This coincidence was initially hilarious, and very pleasurable. At the same time, I could identify with the desire to be accepted into a prestigious tertiary institution, and I empathized with the frustration and anger that followed on from their failure. This was symptomatic of a sea-change in my approach; as I learnt more and more about these people, I became increasingly sympathetic towards them. This is congruent with Wood’s conceptualisation of the comedy of forgiveness. “This comedy, or tragicomedy [...] replaces the knowable with the unknowable, transparency with unreliability, and this is surely in direct proportion to the growth of characters’ fictive inner lives” (8). My investigation, which “seem[ed] at first to assert a superiority” over the abject clichés of Hitler and Hasselhoff, was beginning, “on closer inspection, to offer a hopeless commonality” (3) between me and the butts of my unstable double-joke, who were becoming more complex and interesting to me. In the process, my perception of the relationship between evil and banality became more complex; it moved from an impression of equivalence (banality = evil), towards something less stable, and harder to articulate. Rather than seeing the evil in Hasselhoff, I started to see the banal – and the forgivable – in Hitler. Reading about Hitler’s abusive father and the tragic death of his mother in Ian Kershaw’s biography, I came to feel sorry for young Adolf. Kershaw acknowledges that “if we exclude our knowledge of what was to come, [Hitler’s] family circumstances invoke for the most part sympathy for the child exposed to them” (13) – an uncomfortable emotion, as I discussed in relation to Mein Führer. This feeling of empathy for Hitler was, and still is, unsettling for me; I wanted to hold onto this sense of uncertainty, and transmit it to an audience.

There is a fraught relationship between the intentions and outcomes – the theory and practice – of comedy. In his discussion of The Great Dictator, Alan Dale argues that Chaplin “may have concocted Hynkel in a satiric vein, but to animate him, he had to identify with him” (32). According to Dale, Chaplin is “led in [to make The Great Dictator] by the desire to make a political statement, but the intention fractures in the articulation, which is perhaps more personally revealing than a more coherent political critique would have been” (57). In the case of writing Hitlerhoff, a similar process
occurred. My desire to make a satirical statement “fractured in the articulation”, due to the simultaneous presence of forgiving comedy, irresponsible comedy – and oblique self-portrait. I was particularly drawn to the early periods of Hitler and Hasselhoff’s lives: their childhoods, adolescences, and early adulthoods. These correspond to stages of life that I have personally lived through, and can thus strongly identify with. Dale argues that Chaplin’s caricature of Hitler functions as a distorted self-portrait of Chaplin-as-star, and that Hynkel is thus “the most complete and accurate record Chaplin gave in his movies of what it was like to be him” (58). More specifically, the biographical element of Hitler and Hasselhoff’s stories that most stood out was their shared desire for artistic success and recognition. This is congruent with my own personal ambitions for achievement and acceptance. The story of Hitlerhoff the struggling artist, waiting to be discovered, is also the story of Tom Doig the emerging writer, striving to make his mark on an indifferent world.

_Hitlerhoff_ as a comedy of disruption

As an icon, Hasselhoff epitomises the banality of mindless pleasure: in _Knight Rider_, _Baywatch_, as a pop star, as an ironic internet phenomenon. Conversely, Hitler represents evil, and all manner of displeasure therein. As a dual figure, Hitlerhoff thus embodies the idea of conflicted emotional response – love/hate, amusement/disgust. From the opening video montage of beach scenes juxtaposed with concentration camp footage onwards, and through all manner of ambivalent, bad taste gags and one-liners, _Hitlerhoff_ aims to disrupt its audience, and make them second-guess their own responses. On a structural level, the first forty-five minutes of _Hitlerhoff_ (Scenes One to Ten) represent a conscious attempt to make the audience members identify and empathise with Hitlerhoff; in the final fifteen minutes, this empathy is thrown back in the audience’s faces. I chose to structure the narrative in typical rags-to-riches style (see Campbell; Vogler; Booker, 51-68), to place the audience in a conflicted position _vis-à-vis_ the Hitler aspects of Hitlerhoff. By empathising with a hero who usually embodies extreme villainy, an audience member’s pleasure at Hitlerhoff’s triumphs also unavoidably “involves a certain _displeasure_” (Zizek, 239), since Hitler’s success in the out-of-field of German history comes to represent the trauma, horror and guilt of World War Two and the Holocaust. In performance, there are two key moments in the script that aim to produce an affect of pleasure being abruptly converted into distress: the “jump on my train” sequence (Scene Thirteen), and Hitlerhoff’s final speech (Closing Speech), in which a new disturbing out-of-field reality attempts to puncture the play’s
fictional surface. The success/failure of *Hitlerhoff* as a comedy of disruption, which attempts to simultaneously generate intense pleasure and displeasure, can be gauged from the responses of reviewers and of some audience members (See Appendix ii).

*Hitlerhoff* takes the form of a live theatre performance, with substantial prerecorded video elements. Structurally, *Hitlerhoff* opens with a video sequence combining Nazi propaganda footage with the opening sequence from *Baywatch*; Hitlerhoff emerges from this double-world by exploding through a slit in the screen. The show is bookended by a pair of major speeches, the first one primarily in the style of Hasselhoff, and the final one in the manner of Hitler. The story of *Hitlerhoff* takes place within this frame, and is divided into three sections. The first part (Scene One to Scene Four) concerns Hitlerhoff Junior’s abusive, oedipal childhood, ending with the death of both his parents, and the first sighting of Red Tide Man, Hitlerhoff Junior’s arch-nemesis. The middle section (Scene Five to Scene Ten) encompasses Hitlerhoff Junior’s adolescence and early adulthood, where he struggles to gain recognition as a performer; he is humiliated in a variety of performance contexts (an audition; a theatre production; a stand-up comedy routine), and grows increasingly frustrated and vengeful. The final section (Scenes Eleven to Fourteen) concerns Hitlerhoff’s breakthrough as a performer, and his instant, spectacular success. By this point, Hitlerhoff is determined to take revenge upon his enemies and impose his demented childhood dreams upon the world without delay. *Hitlerhoff* closes with an unfunny and self-consciously didactic speech, which conflates Europe’s historical Holocaust and “our Holocaust” (Abrams, 6) of global poverty and environmental collapse. Towards the end of this speech, the audience is “gassed” by a smoke machine.

**Method of composition**

The script for *Hitlerhoff* was generated through an extended process of mis/quotation, pastiche and parody, influenced by the literary model of Nigel Cox’s *Tarzan Presley* (2004). Adolf Hitler’s autobiography *Mein Kampf* (1924) and David Hasselhoff’s autobiography *Making Waves* (2006) are mis/quoted extensively; the other major source of direct mis/quotations in the script is Ian Kershaw’s biography *Hitler 1889-1936: Hubris* (1998). (Direct textual references are noted in the “Notes to *Hitlerhoff*” section.) There are also a large number of references to German history, contemporary popular culture and Australian politics; these have not been cited. Although I was not aware of the term during the writing of *Hitlerhoff*, the show conforms closely to Hans-
Thies Lehmann’s description of a kind of postdramatic theatre that he calls “Cool Fun”, in which

the spectator follows a course of allusions, citations and counter-citations, insider jokes, motifs from cinema and pop music, a patchwork of rapid, often minute episodes: ironically distanced, sarcastic, without illusion and “cool” in tone. Even the most obvious corny joke is preferable to the intolerable and dishonest “seriousness” of public and official rhetoric [...] The audience is theatricalised, as the awareness of other texts (images, sounds) is evoked and the appropriation of parody is confirmed through laughter – cabaret and comedy thrive on this form of interaction just like Cool Fun. (119)

Not all of Hitlerhoff’s allusions will be apparent to audience members; passing references to “Madagascar”, for example, may or may not trigger an association with Adolf Eichmann’s “Madagascar project” – a tentative plan to relocate “four million Jews from Europe to the French island off the southeast coast of Africa” (Arendt, 76). In practice, this means that Hitlerhoff functions on two levels: first, there is the surface level of gags, farce and parody; second, there is a deeper layer of historical and political referentiality, which might work to intensify, or disrupt, the humour. These referential moments function like faultlines: hairline fractures which initiated audience members can slip down to access another level of awareness. This second layer is only accessible to those with specific prior knowledge about Hitler; Hasselhoff; German history; and US popular culture. This referentiality is somewhat literary, however, and it doesn’t necessarily translate in live, un-footnoted performances. In practice this means that Hitlerhoff lacks the pedagogical ability to teach audiences new facts. Nonetheless, for those audience members who are already aware of these facts, it recombines them in surprising, pleasurable ways.

Hitlerhoff as an independent Fringe Festival production
Hitlerhoff requires three performers. One actor plays Hitlerhoff at all stages of his life; he first appears onstage as an adult, then proceeds to re-enact his own childhood and adolescence as Hitlerhoff Junior, while regularly commenting on his own progress directly to the audience from the present tense of adulthood. (Adult Hitlerhoff also periodically appears onscreen, as an inspirational mentor figure who visits Hitlerhoff Junior in times of crisis.) There is also another male and one female actor; they each play
a variety of roles, starting with Hitlerhoff's mother and father, and covering a shape-shifting array of love interests, allies, mentors and antagonists over the course of the play. With these male and female parts, there is a large amount of disguise, dissimulation, and the playing of roles-within-roles. This purposefully blurs the boundaries between separate characters, which creates a sense that the whole play might be a repetitive Freudian fantasy playing out in Hitlerhoff's imagination.

The video screen is the most significant element of Hitlerhoff's production aesthetic. There are four extended video sequences, of approximately one minute each, which aim to be cinematic in their effects. There are also numerous video titles throughout the show, which are used to evoke settings and/or moods; for example, “Vienna Beach” suggests a physical location, whereas “Power of Dreams” conveys a more abstract sense of place: a dream sequence. These titles were imagined as a post-Brechtian element, similar in form to the factual titles in Arturo Ui, but in this case repetitively conveying the banal glamour of high-budget advertising, rather than any actual information. Other Brechtian production elements were used in a more traditionally alienating manner, such as prerecorded “canned laughter”, applause, and booing. Baudrillard argues that “laughter on American television has taken the place of the chorus in Greek tragedy. It is unrelenting […] It is the screen that is laughing and having a good time. You are simply left alone with your consternation” (49). We wished to create a similar effect in a theatre context, implicating and disrupting the live audience’s responses, as they become aware of a certain pressure to react in a predetermined way. Other significant stylistic features of Hitlerhoff include the minimal use of props; numerous quick-fire scene and costume changes; and stylised, cabaret-style overacting.
Hitlerhoff script

By Tom Doig

Hitlerhoff was first produced in Australia by Young and Restless Productions at the Arts House, North Melbourne Town Hall, Melbourne, in September 2008 for the Melbourne Fringe festival. It was directed by Erin Kelly. Original cast:

Tobias Manderson-Galvin (Hitlerhoff)
Ezra Bix (other male roles)
Simone Page Jones (female roles).

Characters:

HITLERHOFF

(all other male characters are played by a single actor)
DADDY – a domineering Teutonic brute and failed actor
RED TIDE MAN – a communist super-villain, slash evil clown
JUILLIARD – artistic director of the prestigious Juilliard Academy
YUSUF “CHE” ISLAMABAD – a thespian and left-wing revolutionary
UNKNOWN SOLDIER ONE – actually CHE in disguise
HOBBIE BUCHANAN – a crippled boy; enthusiastic and impressionable
VOICEOVER

(all female characters are played by a single actor)
MUMMY – an overly nurturing stage mother type
PAMELA ANDOVICH – a sexy, sinister Russian spy
ROSA LUXEMBURG – a thespian and left-wing revolutionary
UNKNOWN SOLDIER TWO – actually ROSA in disguise
CJ NIGHTINGALE – a devoted British nurse
NOTE ON TIME IN HITLERHOFF:
The play moves between the “present” of HITLERHOFF telling his life story directly to the audience, and the “past”, where HITLERHOFF JUNIOR acts out this life story. This shift is represented by a tabbed indent when HITLERHOFF is speaking in the present.

NOTE ON USE OF VIDEO FOOTAGE IN HITLERHOFF:
Upstage, there is a screen, approximately two and a half metres tall and four metres wide; video footage is projected onto it. This screen has a vertical slit in the centre, enabling HITLERHOFF to pass through – moving from the stage “onto” the screen, and vice versa. To distinguish between the live and pre-recorded HITLERHOFF, the onscreen HITLERHOFF will be referred to as SCREEN HITLERHOFF.

NOTE ON DVD RECORDING OF HITLERHOFF:
The DVD recording of Hitlerhoff included with this MA submission is from the show’s original Melbourne season. The time that each scene starts on the DVD is noted on the script. Minor changes were made to the script following the Melbourne season, and again following the Adelaide season. The most notable structural change is the re-structuring of Hitlerhoff’s final section; Scene Eleven in the current script – Hitlerhoff’s press conference – occurs in the DVD after Scene Thirteen. Suggestion: watch the DVD recording first, to familiarise oneself with how the script works as a performance piece; read the script afterwards, noting where it attempts to move beyond existing staging.

NOTE ON THE STYLE OF HITLERHOFF
In the process of adapting Hitlerhoff from a text into a performance work, numerous exciting possibilities were considered, and had to be abandoned. Some of these options, like interacting with the video screen in a more complex and thematically interesting way, proved both logistically and financially impossible. They also threatened to push Hitlerhoff over the border of Creative Writing into the discipline of Performing Arts, potentially making assessment of the project very difficult. In the future, however, I am determined to experiment with more ambitious staging arrangements, rather than being hamstrung by the dictates of financial realism. Some of these more ambitious stage directions have made it into the final script.
INTRO

[Black-out.

Onscreen: a video sequence mixing footage from Baywatch with Triumph of the Will and Olympia to a cover of the Baywatch theme song: “I’ll be ready”.

Some people stand in the darkness
Afraid to step into the light
Some people need, to help somebody
When the edge of surrender’s in sight

[Cheering crowds, ecstatic faces, waving hands, salutes.]

Don’t you worry,
It’s gonna be all right
‘Cause I’m always ready,
I won’t let you out of my sight

[The Town Hall explodes. title credit: ‘Hitlerhoff’. This title explodes. HITLERHOFF bursts through the screen onto the stage, wearing red Speedos.]

I’ll be ready (I’ll be ready)
Never you fear (no don’t you fear)
I’ll be ready
Forever and always
I’m always here.

HITLERHOFF: Ladies, gentlemen, lovers of great art. Welcome to Hitlerhoff – the show to end all shows! It’s great to be here in Austria- lia. This is a real triumph for me – a triumph of the will, you might say [laughs]. Please stick around! In fact, could someone up the back please lock the ... [theatre door is closed loudly; sound-effect of lock] Danke.

[He paces back and forth, seriously.]

Now, you might have heard some nasty rumours about me, in the [coughs] BOLSHEVIST gutter press. [Mockingly imitates his critics] “He’s a monster”, they say, “a mindless hunk of beefcake. He’s an alcoholic, a fascist criminazi, he can’t even eating the cheesenburger!” Well – [pulls his Speedos up] does it look like I have one testicle to you?!

[HITLERHOFF reaches into his Speedos and removes a battered cheeseburger, covered in tomato sauce. He licks sauce from the burger obscenely, and eats the burger in a sexual manner; blood-red sauce pours down his arm.]
But seriously, volk – forget the lies. Forget the clichés. Forget everything you think you know. If you want the truth, you’ve got to go to the source. If you want the truth about me, you’ve gotta go to the source ... of me. [Licks sauce off his hand.] Ladies and gypsies, as a special treatment I’ll take you there tonight!

But first, a word of warning. I’ve made a lot of friends in my time, but I’ve also made a lot of ... [trails off]. There’s one thing I’ve learnt: If you believe in the power of dreams, anything is possible.

One man can make a difference.

One man can change the world.

That man is me. Hitlerhoff über alles! [Gestures for the audience to clap.]

[Impassioned] People, we stand on the edge of an abyss! The red Ti— [coughs, composes himself]. Sorry, I’m skipping ahead [chuckles]. First, I’d like to take this opportunity to answer some questions I’ve prepared for myself. [SCREEN HITLERHOFF appears: head-and-chest shot.]

HITLERHOFF [to SCREEN HITLERHOFF]: Hitlerhoff, how did you become so great?

SCREEN HITLERHOFF: Well, Hitlerhoff [laughs], funny you should ask. It all began one morning in June some twenty years ago, when I was born a rich man’s son. I had everything that money could buy – but freedom, I had none ...

[SCREEN HITLERHOFF’s mouth opens wide; HITLERHOFF is sucked back into it. Black-out.]

SCENE ONE  [04.13]

Video title: “In the House of my Parents”

[Table with tablecloth, oversized can of sauerkraut. HITLERHOFF JUNIOR enters, singing, and stands on a chair; MUMMY stands devotedly at his feet.]

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR [sings]: The hills are alive, with the sound of music

My heart wants to sing, for a thousand years

The hills fill my heart, with blood

These hills I will rule, for a thousand years ...

MUMMY [sings]: Oh Hoffy, Mummy is so proud of you!

Ever since you were, just a small small girl,

[DADDY enters, carrying a postal sack and pistol. He shoots offstage.]

I knew that you were special!

You are my favourite –
DADDY: Kunst! [Slaps MUMMY.] Eva, Hoffy, I've achtung-ed you about this ...

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: But Daddy, I weren't, we was just acting –

DADDY: Acting like filthy little thesbians! This is why I keep you inside!

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: Mummy!

[DADDY spanks HITLERHOFF JUNIOR.]

DADDY: You're not special ...

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: I'm not sorry ...

DADDY: You're not special ...

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: I'm not sorry ...

DADDY: You’re not special ...

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR [sobbing]: I’m not sorry ...

HITLERHOFF [to audience]: Me and Daddy, we got along like a synagogue on fire. He was a simple man, who liked drinking and boxing his family. In his youth, Daddy wanted to be an entertainer.

[Spotlight on DADDY.]

DADDY: What's black, and blue – all over? [pause.] My son! [Punches HITLERHOFF JUNIOR.]

[Cymbal crash; MUMMY laughs nervously.]

HITLERHOFF [to audience]: ... but he had no talent. None. So instead, he became a [coughs] monster postal worker. Daddy wanted me to follow in his footsteps.

[pause.]
I did not want to follow in his footsteps.

SCENE TWO [06.24]

[Dinnertime. HITLERHOFF JUNIOR joins MUMMY and DADDY at the table. The atmosphere is tense.]

DADDY: Pass the sauerkraut.

MUMMY: Yes dear.

[Pause.]  

How was work today dear?
DADDY: Scheisse! I work and I slave all day, and for what? To keep our good-for-nothing son in leather panties while he prances around like some homo-fraulein! Eva, he will become an alcoholic, a gypsy, a commie thersbian! [To HITLERHOFF JUNIOR] Hitlerhoff Junior, your time has come: tomorrow you will helping me, outside. Work will set you free.

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: But –

MUMMY: But dear, Hoffy has his acting lessons tomorrow –

DADDY: Nein!

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: But Daddy, that’s not fair!

DADDY [to HITLERHOFF JUNIOR]: Fair? What do you think is this, a fairground?! Eat your wiener.

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: I’m a veget-arian.

DADDY: You need the hard re-education – licking envelopes envelopes envelopes envelopes.

HITLERHOFF: But –

DADDY: You think this world is interested in your oratorical talents?

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: Yes.

DADDY: Well it’s not.

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR [sotto voce]: Will be.

DADDY: Nein! Your beating is not until nine; don’t making me beat you earlier. Hitlerhoff Junior, you must learn: life is a battlefield. Dog eats dog, man eats wife, strong eats all – this is our destiny! Now useful that big mouth to eat sauerkraut –

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: Powerkraut –

DADDY: What did you say?!

[Silence.]

All this rebellious putsch disturbs my sphincter. I’m going to the crappenhausen. Silence! [DADDY exits. Gunshots and swearing offstage. MUMMY and HITLERHOFF JUNIOR wait until he is out of earshot.]

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: Mummy, please don’t make me go to the outside! [sobs.]

MUMMY: There there Hoffy, don’t cry ... Mummy will find a way. I know, you can pretend to be sick tomorrow – a fever! Once daddy goes to work, we can have a special acting lesson that goes all day long!

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: You’re the best mummy in the whole world!

MUMMY: There’s something special about you, Hoffy, you can feel it in my bosom. You have a ... gift. Use it.
HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: Mummy, I had a ... dream last night.
MOTHER: Was it about – your destiny?
HITLERHOFF JUNIOR [stands up, walks downstage]: I was in our living space, and it was so big ... it stretched on forever, like an endless beach covered in skulls ... I was running in slow-motion, looking for freedom.
MUMMY: How visionary!
HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: In the distance, I saw a man ... a hero superman, with muscles like coconuts and hair like a tsunami ...
MUMMY: Oh, Hoffy ...
HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: I ran towards him, and he told me ...
MUMMY: Yes?
[DADDY re-enters room.]
HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: ... He told me that I was going to be a great –
DADDY: Bullshit –
HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: – artist!
MUMMY: Artist! } at the same time
DADDY: Kunst?! }
HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: The biggest kunst the world has ever known!
DADDY: Never, not as long as I live! You will working in postal office like your master, until you are old, dead, nothing.
HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: But –
DADDY: Obey your father-land!
HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: You’ll be sorry – I’m going to be the most watched man in all the world.
DADDY: You will being the most beaten boy in all the world ...

HITLERHOFF [to audience]: I really didn’t want to follow in his footsteps.

[Black-out.]

SCENE THREE [10.56]

Video title: “Power of Dreams”

[Lights slowly up. HITLERHOFF JUNIOR onstage, alone. He is carrying DADDY’s postal sack, nervous about being “outside”. Sound effects of explosions, Rifle fire.]
HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: Work will set you free, work will set you free – I'll show you work will set you free!

[HITLERHOFF JUNIOR has a tantrum: empties the postal satchel onto the stage, kicks the envelopes until he is exhausted and upset. He kneels, puts his hands together in prayer and looks to the ceiling.]

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: Our father – not Daddy! – doing art in heaven, Hitlerhoff be my name. My kingdom come, It will be done, On earth, and on television. Give us this day, our milky mummy, And kill all the trespassers, Before they try to trespass and kill us. And lead me not to an office, But let me be an artist, For mein kampf is the kingdom, The power and the glory, For ever and ever, forever!

[SCREEN HITLERHOFF appears.]

SCREEN HITLERHOFF: Believe in the power of dreams, Hoffy!

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: It’s you!

SCREEN HITLERHOFF: Power of dreams ... dreams ... dreeeeeem seeeeequueeeence ...

[Dream sequence: “Ride of the Valkyries”, half-speed. DADDY beats MUMMY in slow-motion; HITLERHOFF JUNIOR watches, horrified.]

DADDY [as if backmasked]: Free ... you ... set ... will ... work ... free ... you ... set ... will ... work ...

[HITLERHOFF JUNIOR sits on a miniature KITT car, turns on its flashing KITT light, and runs DADDY over. DADDY collapses and dies, stage right. HITLERHOFF JUNIOR and MUMMY embrace, and dance. Music cuts out. Lights slowly up: MUMMY is crying uncontrollably. HITLERHOFF JUNIOR attempts to console her.]

HITLERHOFF: [to audience] Can you imagine our shock and awe when we awoke to find that Daddy had been disappeared? [Kicks DADDY offstage.]
Mummy slept through the whole nasty – she didn’t see a thing. I was sick at the time, a fever, delirious, couldn’t leave my – I was away at a special camp for special young actors. Mummy ... Mummy was beside herself. But as I held her against my growing body, I felt her ... I felt her. It was the greatest and most unforgettable time of my earthly existence.

[MUMMY continues crying.]

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: There there, Mummy, don’t cry. Hey – I’ve booked us into a little log cabin in Berchtesgaden! Just the two of us, Daddy away at the outside and never coming back ... Mummy. Stop crying Mummy! I’m right here!

HITLERHOFF [to audience]: But mummy ... [HITLERHOFF and MUMMY sit onstage, and ‘row’.] We were out in a rowboat, paddling on the lake. The water was quiet. Too quiet.

SCENE FOUR [15.03]

Video Title: “Cyclone B”

[A storm: sound effects of rain, thunder, etc. MUMMY is knocked out of the boat, and begins drowning.]

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: Don’t worry babe – I’ll save you!

[HITLERHOFF JUNIOR reaches MUMMY. Lighting change: deep red. MUMMY screams. RED TIDE MAN enters.]

RED TIDE MAN enters, with a cape, and a fake flower on his lapel.

RED TIDE MAN: I am the Red Tide. The most sinister marine phenomenon known to man!

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: Stay away from my Mummy!

[HITLERHOFF JUNIOR tries to stop RED TIDE MAN, but RED TIDE MAN overpowers him. RED TIDE MAN offers his flower for MUMMY to sniff. MUMMY, charmed, inhales deeply; RED TIDE MAN sprays gas in MUMMY’s face. MUMMY collapses, unconscious.]

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: Nooo!!

[HITLERHOFF JUNIOR cradles MUMMY in his arms. RED TIDE MAN laughs sinisterly.]

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: Demon! I will not rest until you are destroyed!
RED TIDE MAN: You haven’t seen the last of me, fascist. The Red Tide is on the rise! [Exits.]

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: And you haven’t seen the last, of – me!

[HITLERHOFF JUNIOR swims with back to shore with MUMMY. He lays her body on the ground and performs CPR.]

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: One-one thousand, two-one thousand, three-one thousand … no!

[MUMMY’s body starts to move; she regains consciousness.]

MUMMY: Avenge my death, Hoffy, avenge my death …

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: I will, mummy – but how?

MUMMY: Follow your dreams. Become a famous … a great – [RED TIDE MAN reappears] – monster!

[MUMMY dies. HITLERHOFF JUNIOR howls with grief. RED TIDE MAN laughs cruelly, and exits. SCREEN HITLERHOFF appears.]

SCREEN HITLERHOFF: I know that things are hard for you right now Hoffy, but believe me, they will get better.

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: But she’s dead. She’s dead!

SCREEN HITLERHOFF: No obstacle is too great for you to overcome. You’ve just got to keep struggling, and keep believing.

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: In what? My life is over.

SCREEN HITLERHOFF: Believe in yourself, Hoffy. [SCREEN MUMMY walks into frame, wearing a bathing suit.]

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: Mummy!

[SCREEN MUMMY places her head on SCREEN HITLERHOFF’s shoulder, and runs her fingers through his chest-hair.]

SCREEN HITLERHOFF: One man can make a difference. One man can change the world. That man is me. One day, it will be you.

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: Me?

SCREEN HITLERHOFF: Go to the Juilliard Academy for special young actors, where dreams come true!

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: But, I don’t, I can’t …

SCREEN HITLERHOFF: Power of dreams – dreams – dreams … [screen image fades out.]
HITLERHOFF [to audience]: I had reached a turning point in my hero’s journey. I had to leave the ordinary world behind, and accept the call to adventure. I had to cross the threshold, from Act One, into ... Act Two!

SCENE FIVE [18.42]
[Video sequence, in the style of “Hooked on a Feeling”: HITLERHOFF JUNIOR traveling around the world, on a quest. Music: “Looking For Freedom”, sans lyrics. JUILLIARD enters and watches, disgusted.]

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR [sings, badly]: ... Iiiiiiii
Headed down the track, my baggage on my back
I left the city far behind
Walkin’ down the road, with my heavy load
Tryin’ to find some peace of mind
Father said “you’ll be sorry, son,
If you leaving home this way
And when you realise, you are idiot potato-dunce homo-fraulein –”
Fuck you Daddy!
I’ve been lookin for freeeee–
JUILLIARD: Dumb!
HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: Excuse me?
JUILLIARD: If only you were dumb. Mute. Lacking in vocal capacity!
HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: But I haven’t finished –
JUILLIARD: Oh, you’re finished all right. Where did you learn to sing – in an abattoir? In all my years as Artistic Director of the prestigious Juilliard Academy, that is the worst audition I have ever been subjected to.
HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: Would you like to see my Macbeth? [JUILLIARD flinches]
JUILLIARD: Don’t even think about it. You don’t need acting lessons, you need psychiatric help!
HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: To be, or don’t be too, not –
JUILLIARD: Stop butchering the immortal bard! Something is rotten, in the state of you. Let’s try something else ... I’ve got it! Take off your shoes. [HITLERHOFF JUNIOR does so.] Now walk around. [HITLERHOFF JUNIOR does so.] Not bad ... your shirt. [HITLERHOFF JUNIOR looks at his shirt unsurely.] Take it off. [HITLERHOFF JUNIOR does so.] Hmmm. Pants. [HITLERHOFF JUNIOR pants like a dog.] No!
[HITLERHOFF JUNIOR takes off his pants.] Take a deep breath. Hold it.
[HITLERHOFF JUNIOR does so.] Better. Now, jog on the spot. [HITLERHOFF JUNIOR does so.] Excellent. Now, clasp your hands together. Tighter. Shake them. [HITLERHOFF JUNIOR shakes his hands, as if victorious.] Faster, stronger, higher! Now – down!
[HITLERHOFF JUNIOR smashes both hands into his crotch. He screams in pain; blood goes everywhere.]

JUILLIARD: Great – you can follow orders. Now, read me this monologue in your most Poetical Voice. [Hands HITLERHOFF JUNIOR a sheet of paper.]

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR [reading, overacting]: “... I the undersigned, Hitlerhoff Junior, hereby promise to renounce acting, forever. Never again will I sing; never again will I dance; never again will I gratuitously take my pants off! I will never perform in public, ever – it would do more harm than I can possibly imagine. From this day forth, I solemnly vow to devote all my energy to serving Austria-lia Post, upon threat of castration and death. Through rain, through snow, through hail and lightning war, I will ceaselessly strive to ... deliver ... envelope ...” [screws up sheet.] I will not deliver envelopes. [Pause.]
I’m going to be the most-watched man in all the world.
JUILLIARD: Over my dead body! You will never work in this town again, marcht my words. [exits.]

HITLERHOFF [to audience]: I waited with burning impatience, and quiet confidence, for the official results of my audition.

[HITLERHOFF JUNIOR pulls an envelope out from his back pocket and opens it.]

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR [to himself]: So when do I sta... [trails off.] There must be some mistake. They sent my acceptance letter to the wrong Hitlerhoff, and I got his ... Well, nobody’s perfect. I’ll sort out this little bureaucratic blunder in a jiffy ...

[HITLERHOFF JUNIOR walks offstage and screams. He returns.]

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR [to himself]: They rejected me, they turned me down, they threw me out. Jew-liard! That bureaucrat, that gypsy, that filthy pole-guzzling thesbian ... wouldn’t know talent if it pistol-whipped him onto a train and pissed in his skull!
The whole Academy ought to be blown up. I demand another audition – that one was an ambush! It’s a malignant conspiracy, they stabbed me in the back, they ... They’re scared
of me. They know what a hit I’d be in Austria-lia! You wouldn’t need any other action heroes. Pull over, MacGyver – I’ll catch that foreign terrorist! Hasta la vista, Arnie baby – I’ll travel back in time and save the world from evil robots! Evil, prancing robots – they’ve infiltrated Juilliard! My patience is at an end! Poison gas will be met with poison gas! Rejection will be met with poison ...

[pause]
They will regret this. Everyone will regret this.
What the hell am I going to do now?

[SCREEN HITLERHOFF appears.]
SCREEN HITLERHOFF: Go to the Juilliard Academy for special young actors, where dreams come true!

[pause.]
HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: Were you ... watching, just then?
SCREEN HITLERHOFF: ... Hi!
HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: Did you catch any of that?
SCREEN HITLERHOFF: Power of dreams! [Fades out.]

SCENE SIX  [23.42]

Video Title: “Vienna Beach”

HITLERHOFF [to audience]: I ran and I ran, until my legs ached, until my chest heaved, until I could only run in slow-motion ...

[PAMELA ANDOVICH is onstage, dressed in a red one-piece swimsuit. PAMELA smiles seductively at HITLERHOFF, whispers into her cleavage, walks into the ocean and starts “drowning”.]
PAMELA: Helpski! Helpski!

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: No! Not again!

[HITLERHOFF JUNIOR strips down to red Speedos and “swims” to PAMELA. He swims back to shore with her, lays her body on the ground, rolls her body upstage and performs CPR.]

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: One-one thousand year Reich, two-one thousand year Reich ...

[PAMELA’s body starts to move; HITLERHOFF JUNIOR starts pashing her. PAMELA pushes him away.]

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: Easy, babe – Hoffy’s got you now!
PAMELA: Am I ... in heavenski?

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: The next best thing. Vienna Beach – where dreams come true!
PAMELA: I escape from dreaded gulag in Vladivostok. I am political prisoner. I love freedom – they lock me up-ski! I say, “Pamela Andovich, you must swim to freedom – even if you die-ski”! So I water-ski – swim. But the Red Tide – it see me, it chase me! I say, “Pamela Andovich –”

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: Shut up and kiss me!

[HITLERHOFF JUNIOR pashes PAMELA again, extremely passionately. PAMELA’s limbs flail wildly.]

HITLERHOFF [to audience]: ]: Pamela Andovich was a red, white and blonde, dripping wet dream. She was the perfect woman – tender and sweet, cute and cuddly, naive and stupid. Pammy was always asking me these adorable questions – where did I grow up? What was my deepest longing? Did I know any state secrets? It was the greatest and most unforgettable time of my earthly existence.

[HITLERHOFF JUNIOR walks PAMELA around, pointing grandly.]

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: ... and over there, babe, from the ashes of the Juilliard Academy I will erect a mighty theatre – an uber-mega-schau-spiel-disco-hausen! Big enough to seat six million souls, with special talking train services pouring in from every corner of the ... I will be a star, Pammy. My face will burn into the minds of millions! Can I tell you something important, babe? [PAMELA gets out an unconvincing “secret” recording device.] I know we only met three minutes ago, but I think ... I love you.
PAMELA: Am there anything else Hoffski?

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: Oh Pammy, my little woodland spirit – I’ve never felt anything like this before! Except maybe as a small boy ...
PAMELA: This theatre, Hoffski, when am you plan to build it?

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: Mummy ... [HITLERHOFF JUNIOR begins to sob. PAMELA comforts him.] Oh mummy, I miss you so much ... your skin like fresh goat’s cheese, hair as golden as a golden shower, your bosom like – this ...
PAMELA: Da, Hoffski, tell me everything ...

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: Your strong Aryan thighs, aching to be spread wide, wider than a ...
PAMELA: The trains, Hoffski – tell me!
HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: The MUMMY trains, hurtling towards dark, moist MUMMY tunnels, through the Pyrenees MUMMY mountains to the mighty delta of ... You’re not my mummy! [PAMELA jumps up.] This is an ambush, a stab in the ... booby-trap!

PAMELA [into cleavage]: Oedipussy to Red Tide: mission abortski! Move to Plan B!

[PAMELA runs offstage, left; HITLERHOFF JUNIOR begins to chases her. RED TIDE MAN’s head appears, stage right; HITLERHOFF JUNIOR goes to chase him. PAMELA’s head appears, stage left. HITLERHOFF JUNIOR tries to chase them both at once, and falls over. He repositions himself on the ground, like a male model.]

HITLERHOFF [to audience]: Me and Pammy grew apart. She had to focus on her career, and I was still looking for freedom. I knew in my heart that we would mate again. Meanwhile, I was young, and I was restless. I was ready to be discovered!

SCENE SEVEN [28.27]

Video Title: “The Nouveau Socialist Democratic Anarchist Players”

[CHE and ROSA rehearse a scene from The Crucible. HITLERHOFF JUNIOR enters.]

ROSA [playing ABIGAIL]: I saw Goody Proctor with the Devil! I saw Goody Goody with the Devil! I saw Goody –

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: Can I help? I was born to fight evil!

ROSA [staring at HITLERHOFF JUNIOR]: The Devil! The Devil!

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: This devil guy, is he about this tall, red cape?

ROSA: Fuck! You broke my fourth wall!

CHE: Don’t you know The Crucible?

HITLERHOFF: The Red what?

ROSA: Arthur Miller, man.

CHE: The persecuted genius playwright? He used the Salem witch-hunts as an allegory for the government’s paranoid anti-communist hysteria –

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: Commies – where?!

ROSA: We’re acting, man. I’m Rosa Luxemburg – but you can call me “comrade”.

CHE: Yusuf Islamabad – but call me “Che”.

ROSA: We are a revolutionary Brechtian ensemble –

CHE and ROSA: The Nouveau Socialist Democratic Anarchist Players!
HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: What a coincidence – I’m a great actor too!

[Beat.]

HITLERHOFF [to audience]: And so it was that I joined the Nouveau Socialist Democratic Anarchist Players – “insdap” for short. It was still a tiny collective, but I knew that if I kept struggling, it was sure to grow, and grow, and grow, and grow, and – it was the greatest and most unforgettable time of my earthly existence.

Rosa encouraged me to audition for the “insdap”s next production, and even though my last audition – [shouts] Poison Gas! – I got it. They gave me the leading –

ROSA: Not really –

HITLERHOFF [to audience]: the starring –

CHE: Not exactly –

HITLERHOFF [to audience]: they gave me the title role in the most important performance of the twentieth-century. Che said it would be a real “lesson” about being the centre of attention. I couldn’t wait!

[HITLERHOFF JUNIOR onstage, doing warm-up exercises: singing, stretching etc.]

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR [Placing emphasis on different words]: Make the lie big, keep it simple stupid, keep saying it. Make the lie big, keep it simple stupid, keep saying it. Make the lie –

[ROSA enters.]

ROSA: This is it, Hoffy.

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: My big break!

ROSA: This is going to be really tough, but it’s for your own good. You have ... potential. Everyone does.

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: Rosa, babe, I’m having some trouble with my lines ...

[CHE enters.]

CHE: Just wait for your cue, comrade.

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[HITLERHOFF JUNIOR walks to the side of the stage. ROSA and CHE are acting in Waiting for Godot.]

ROSA [as ESTRAGON]: People are bloody ignorant apes.
CHE [as VLADIMIR]: Pah!

[CHE spits. ROSA moves to centre, halts with her back to stage.]

ROSA: Charming spot. [She turns to face audience.] Inspiring prospects. Let’s go.
CHE: We can’t.
ROSA: Why not?
CHE: We’re waiting.

HITLERHOFF [to audience]: I waited for my cue.

ROSA: You’re sure it was here?
CHE: What?
ROSA: That we were to wait.

HITLERHOFF [to audience]: Waited, and waited. I practised my lines under my breath: “Hi, I’m Monsieur Godotte! Sorry I’m so late, the traffic ...” But my cue didn’t come.

[CHE and ROSA bow, and congratulate each other on a good show. They sit in a circle with a ‘talking stick’ in the middle.’ During this sequence, the characters pick up the ‘talking stick’ before speaking.]

HITLERHOFF: I’m feeling really under-valued right now. I’m hurting, and I’m feeling ... fury.
ROSA: Good, Hoffy. Express it out.
HITLERHOFF JUNIOR [shouts]: How can I play Godotte if you don’t remember my fucking cue?
CHE: You still think you’re special?
HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: Yes.
CHE: Well you’re not. No one is.
ROSA: This is all part of our plan, Hoffy. Before you face your first audience, we have to break you down.
CHE: To nothing.

ROSA: Then we can re-educate you, until you’re able to transform, like us!

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR [waving the talking stick like a police baton]: What a crock of commie shit! All this kunst, its all – kunst! My patience is at an end. You degenerate commie thesbiains – you too Rosa, I don’t love you any more! – should all be shot, beaten, gassed, starved, gassed, raped, gassed, tortured, gassed, exterminated, gassed, gassed, gassed! All of you! I’m quitting your stupid “insdap”!

[HITLERHOFF JUNIOR throws the talking stick away.]

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR [mimes]: I’ll never perform in public again!

[Pause. HITLERHOFF JUNIOR walks over and picks up the stick.]

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: I’ll never perform in public again!

[CHE and ROSA exit.]

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR [to himself]: Damnit! The “insdap” was meant to be my ticket to the big time. But all those treacherous thesbiains really wanted was world revolution, and a classless society for all … what the hell am I going to do now?

[SCREEN HITLERHOFF appears.]

SCREEN HITLERHOFF: Go to the Juilliard Academy for special young actors, where –

[HITLERHOFF JUNIOR pulls out the remote control and changes the channel. Flash of static.]

SCREEN HITLERHOFF: Go to the Juilliard – [HITLERHOFF JUNIOR changes channel]

SCREEN HITLERHOFF: Go to the –

SCREEN HITLERHOFF: Power of –

SCREEN HITLERHOFF: You could try painting? –

SCREEN HITLERHOFF: Architecture? –

SCREEN HITLERHOFF: Alcoholism? –

[HITLERHOFF JUNIOR throws the remote control at the screen. Onscreen: a huge explosion.]

SCENE EIGHT [33-40]

[Video sequence: war footage, from WWI and Vietnam. Lights flash on and off. Music: “Paint it Black” by the Rolling Stones, mashed with the Knight Rider theme and Wagner’s “Ride of the Valkyries”. UNKNOWN SOLDIER ONE and UNKNOWN
SOLDIER TWO enter, pantomiming: firing guns and throwing grenades. HITLERHOFF JUNIOR puts on a military uniform and carries a postal sack.

HITLERHOFF [to audience]: I found myself on the greatest stage the world had ever known, in the middle of the mightiest drama of all time. I felt as though my heart would burst! Days, months, years whizzed by. It was the greatest and most – etcetera, etcetera.

[UNKNOWN SOLDIER ONE and UNKNOWN SOLDIER TWO are huddled in the trenches. HITLERHOFF JUNIOR arrives cheerfully.]

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: Merry Christmas, Unknown Soldier One, here is your mail. Merry Christmas, Unknown Soldier Two – your mail. Hitlerhoff ... Hitlerhoff ... nothing for Hitlerhoff? Oh well! You chaps are my family – and my only friends!

[Awkward silence.]

UNKNOWN SOLDIER ONE and TWO: No, we’re not.

[UNKNOWN SOLDIER ONE and UNKNOWN SOLDIER TWO take off their military outfits – it is CHE and ROSA.]

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: Che! Rosa! How did ... got drafted, did we?

ROSA [stage whisper]: The NSDAP has infiltrated the Joy Division, Hoffy.

CHE [stage whisper]: We’re gonna put on a big show in the military hospital.

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: You sell-outs!

ROSA: We’re not here to entertain, Hoffy! We want this unjust war to end – now! We’re gonna to use the power of art to win over the hearts and minds of the troops –

CHE: From the inside.

ROSA: Join our subversive cause, comrade!

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: Are you crazy? You commie thesbians – I hate everything you stand for! The army is the place for me. I’m part of something bigger, I’m making a difference – I’m changing the friggin world! My fatherland needs me, to ... deliver ... these ... [looks at envelope, as if for the first time] envelopes?! [Screams.]

[HITLERHOFF looks between CHE and ROSA, and the sack of envelopes.]

What the hell am I going to do ... [has an idea. Claps his hands together and shakes them over his head, then swings them towards his leg. Black-out. HITLERHOFF JUNIOR screams.]

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SCENE NINE

VOICEOVER: And now, we are very proud to present, all the way from Vienna Beach: the NSDAP!

[Canned applause. HITLERHOFF JUNIOR enters, his leg in a cast.]

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: Hey there, ladies and thesbians – sorry, ladies and germs! [canned laughter] Bacteria! [canned laughter] Plague! ... A funny thing happened to me on the way to the hospital. [canned laughter] I broke my leg – on purpose! [laughter] That’s how badly I wanted this gig! [canned applause.]

What’s the best thing about war?

War crimes! [canned laughter]

Knock knock.

Gestapo! [canned laughter]

Did you hear the one about the Aryan dalek?

Exterminate, exterminate – exterminate! [canned applause]

[ROSA hops onto stage; she is bound and gagged. ROSA rips the ropes off and struggles to take the duct tape off her lips.]

How many gypsies does it take to steal a lightbulb?
Six million! [canned laughter]

How many niggers does it take to change Rwanda?
Six million! [canned laughter]

How many children starve to death every year?
Six million! [canned applause]

... So, a communist, a negro, a homosexual, a gypsy, a catholic, a retard and a Jew walk into a gas chamber –

ROSA: Stop – you’re poisoning our minds!

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR [furious]: This is my time to shine! [canned applause.]

ROSA: Traitor. We trusted you!

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR [to audience]: What do you get if you cross Che and Rosa? ["what?"] A whole show to yourself! [canned applause]

ROSA [to audience, very quickly]: The opinions and views expressed by this man do not reflect the opinions and views of the NSDAP. We stand for peace, revolution and good production values, not that foul, hateful, amateur –

[HITLERHOFF JUNIOR pins ROSA to the ground.]
HITLERHOFF JUNIOR [to audience]: Why did the Hitlerhoff cross the road? To destroy the other side! [Pulls out a knife, is about to stab ROSA in the back.]

RED TIDE MAN: Boo. Boo!

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: Who’s there?

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: Ah! [lets go of ROSA.]

RED TIDE MAN: Boo! Boo! [Canned heckling. RED TIDE MAN encourages audience to join in.] Your jokes are not funny. Boo! [canned heckling.] Your bad taste is not ironic. Boo! [canned heckling.] Your sexism and homophobia suggest infantile Oedipal fixations. Boo! [canned heckling.] Your hate-crimes don’t even make sense!

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: Don’t hassle the Hitlerhoff! [Collapses.]

RED TIDE MAN: You are offensive, unprofessional, incoherent, unoriginal – and obvious! Where’d you learn to sing – in an abattoir?! [canned laughter]

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: I’m not sorry, I’m not sorry ...

RED TIDE MAN: You are a monster, Hitlerhoff Junior. You are bad, so bad it’s ... evil. [pause] Your mother would be ashamed.

[RED TIDE MAN leans over and ‘gasses’ HITLERHOFF JUNIOR with his fake squirter flower.]

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: Nooo!!

[HITLERHOFF JUNIOR breaks down, coughing and sobbing. RED TIDE MAN Exits, laughing sinisterly. Black-out.]

SCENE TEN [37.48]

Video Title: “Emergency”

[Black-out.]

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR [to audience, with husky voice]: Everything was black. The mustard gas had ravaged my vocal chords – I would never sing again. I found myself in the middle of a Great Depression. Ever since the day of my mother’s funeral, I had not wept. After the Juilliard Academy audition conspiracy – no. Those lonely nights on Vienna Beach, sleeping on broken glass, cruel stars piercing me like long knives – not then. All through the Great War, delivering envelopes to everyone, except myself – nothing. But now ... [sobs gently]

It’s over. It’s all over. They hated me. Fucking critics!
You think I’m a monster, an idiot. You think I’m the worst thing that ever happened to the twentieth century.

But what did I do that was so wrong, so different? “One man can make a difference.” “Follow your dreams.” “Avenge my death.” Well, I’ve spent mein whole kampf trying to be special. I never gave up – I believed in myself! But you all ... no one understands me.

You laugh in my face – then stab me in the back.

[Lights slowly up. HITLERHOFF JUNIOR is in a hospital bed. HOBIE BUCHANAN and CJ NIGHTINGALE are listening intently.]

CJ: Please, Sir, don’t stop your fantastic yarn. It’s better than the telly!

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: What?

HOBIE: What does Hoffy do next? Make him fly to Madagascar – in a talking car!

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: This isn’t some TV show – this is my life.

CJ: It’s the most touching tale. Such hardships, such hard ... [touches HITLERHOFF JUNIOR’s abdominal muscles, and shivers.] What happens next?

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: I’ve told you everything. Pamela Andovich – that was a disaster. The Treaty of Versailles, Che, Rosa – those backstabbing commie thesbiants! I should’ve stayed in the trenches, with my only friends.

HOBIE and CJ: We’re your friends, Hoffy.

CJ: And we just adore your flights of fancy! Tell single mother CJ Nightingale and little crippled Hobie Buchanan another one!

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: Well ... after we lost the war, I finally gave up. All my life I had this stupid blind faith that I could make a difference. But one day I realised:

[beat]

I had to stop saving the world, and start saving myself.

[HITLERHOFF JUNIOR busts out of his shirt: his chest is spectacularly hairy. He has become adult HITLERHOFF. HOBIE and CJ gasp.]

HITLERHOFF [to CJ, remembering something he has been told, in Scene Four]: I know that things are hard for you right now, babe, but believe me, they will get – harder.

[HITLERHOFF pulls CJ’s hand onto his crotch.]

CJ: Oh!

HITLERHOFF [to HOBIE, remembering something he has been told]: Hobie, no obstacle is too great for you to overcome. You’ve just got to keep fighting, and keep believing.

HOBIE: Fighting and believing!
[HITLERHOFF stands, and pulls his cast off.]
HITLERHOFF: We live in a crazy, evil world. Deep down inside me, everyone knows that something is horribly wrong. But no one knows what it is –
CJ: Commie thesbiants –
HITLERHOFF: And no one knows what to do about it –
HOBIE: Kill 'em all!

HITLERHOFF [to audience]: It was then that I realised something I had always felt in my heart: I could speak. And people, they could listen!

HITLERHOFF [to CJ and HOBIE]: It was then that I realised something I had always felt in my heart: I could speak. And people, they could listen!
[HITLERHOFF touches HOBIE’s legs.]
HITLERHOFF: Power of dreams!
[HOBIE struggles to get out of his chair.]
CJ: No, Hobie – it’s too soon!
HOBIE: [starts to walk] Strength ... through ... joy! [Moves quickly from awkward hobbling, to proper walking, to dancing a jig, to goosestep marching.] I’m gonna join the Joy Division!
CJ: Touch my heart, Hoffy – I want to feel again!
HITLERHOFF [chuckles]: Okay babe, just don’t tell my wife ...
[HITLERHOFF caresses CJ’s breasts.]
HOBIE: You’re like a magic doctor of the night ...
CJ: The Night Doctor! [CJ faints into HITLERHOFF’s arms.]
HOBIE: The Night Doctor!
HITLERHOFF: The Night Doctor!
[Blackout.]

SCENE ELEVEN [50.40]

Video Title: “Hitlerhoff is the Night Doctor”
Onscreen: a video sequence. SCREEN HITLERHOFF is incredibly famous, rich and successful, surrounded by Aryan celebrities.
The screen opens up like a garage door; the KITT car from Knight Rider drives slowly onstage, with HITLERHOFF on the bonnet, playing a black electric guitar shaped like a swastika.

HITLERHOFF: Lights, camera, Auschwitz! [Laughs for a very long time.]

Glitter, dollar bills, fan-mail, golden Stars of David, and black swastikas fall from the sky in slow-motion.

HITLERHOFF [to himself]: Envelopes, envelopes, envelopes ... all for the Night Doctor! [He catches an envelope in mid-air, opens it and reads aloud.] “Dear Night Doctor, thank you for autographing my daughter after your rousing speech! Your manly fingers have cured her thesbianism, and she’s just dying for you to call, like you promised ...”


[Lights up: a press conference. HOBIE and CJ have “Hitlerhoff” armbands.]

HOBIE: Master Night Doctor Sir! Your incredible healing powers – what is your secret?

HITLERHOFF: Let’s just say I believe in the power of dreams. [applause.]

CJ: Your Honourable Greatness! What do you think is causing this foul sickness?

HITLERHOFF: Communism. [pause.] Thesbianism. [pause.] The Red Tide! [Boo]

[HOBIE and CJ scream. They hold pre-scripted cue cards up to front-row audience members’ faces, forcing them to ask questions to HITLERHOFF. HITLERHOFF drinks from a hipflask.]

AUDIENCE MEMBER ONE: Our superior worshipful father-figure, please tell us about your new show.

HITLERHOFF: It is set in a paradise on earth. Everyone is tanned, hairless, blonde-eyed and blue-blood blazing. [applause] It is always summer, every day is a holiday, and everyone always goes to beach, mate. [applause] Fertile women and super men perform heroic deeds in a eugenic montage of perfect teeth, tits, rollerblades, dildoes, hot pink cunt and frozen yoghurt. [Canned applause] My show will catch on like the plague across Austria-lia, -lia, -lia, lia, lia, making me the most-watched man in the history of civilisation. People will still be talking about me one thousand years time! [salutes. Canned applause.]

AUDIENCE MEMBER TWO: Oh beloved charismatic overlord, what is the moral of your show?
HITLERHOFF: There is no evil on this planet that cannot be conquered by the right mix of plastic surgery and special treatment. [applause.]

AUDIENCE MEMBER THREE: Mr Beefcake, are you drunk?

HITLERHOFF: What?!

AUDIENCE MEMBER THREE: Is it true what Pamela Andovich says, that you only have one testicle?

[HITLERHOFF prepares to stab AUDIENCE MEMBER THREE. Blackout.]

HITLERHOFF [to audience]: The gutter press! [Deep calming breath.] The Night Doctor exterminates all the negative influences in his life, he concentrates on making a difference. People believe in his power, he grows from the power of their belief. All over the world – hospitals, talk shows, saving lives, granting [coughs] MERCY DEATHS – it is the greatest [Drinks from a hipflask; his monologue continues – it is pre-recorded. HITLERHOFF keeps his mouth shut. His hand twitches like Bruno Ganz in Downfall.] and most unforgettable time of my earthly existence. But it’s not all special treatment and happy endings for the Night Doctor. A terrible plague sweeps the land. The Red Tide is spreading, rising, like a huge … body of water.

No one is safe! No one knows what – or who – is responsible … The Night Doctor switches from auto-cruise mode into pursuit mode. He needs to touch more women and children. He needs to touch the whole world!

SCENE TWELVE [48.21]

HITLERHOFF: Reichsführer Sonderkommando und Powerkraut Hobie, Ober-gruppen-Panzergrenadier mit Jagermeister CJ – are we ready to party?

HOBIE: Affirmative, Night Doctor! Degenerate theatres from Moscow to Madagascar have been re-educated into train stations. They are full of waste thesbians! We are ready to shift some units.

HITLERHOFF: Excellent! [To CJ] And my uber-mega-schau-spiel-disco-hausen?

CJ: Nearly finished, Night Doctor! It will be the greatest uber-mega-schau-spiel-disco-hausen [HITLERHOFF says this word along with CJ] the world has ever seen!

HITLERHOFF: Capacity?

CJ: Six million.

HITLERHOFF: Is that possible?
CJ: Unimaginable, but possible.
HITLERHOFF: Wunderbar. And the vibe?
[CJ and HOBIE look at HITLERHOFF blankly.]

HITLERHOFF [to CJ]: The word on the street, Ober-grappen-Panzergrenadier mit Jagermeister. The buzz. [Looks into the crowd] Are the people ... relaxed and comfortable?

CJ: They are alert, and alarmed.
HOBIE: They are angry! The Red Tide is ruining their lives!

CJ: It is poisoning our fishes –
HOBIE: Melting our icecaps –
CJ: Destroying our beaches!
HOBIE: There is less and less land –
CJ: More and more thesbi ans –
HOBIE: New ones popping out every second!
CJ: Prices are skyrocketing –
HOBIE: Inflation, immigration, fighting on the beaches –
CJ: No jobs –
HOBIE: No petrol –
CJ: No water –
CJ and HOBIE: No hope!

HITLERHOFF: Bummer. It’s even worse than I thought.

HOBIE: The people must be ready for the next phase of your plan, Night Doctor.
HITLERHOFF: The next phase?
CJ and HOBIE: As you command Night Doctor!

[HOBIE and CJ walk towards the audience, and hand out badges to the audience. Onscreen, graphics appear: two bodies, which are covered by red-and-yellow stars.]

HOBIE [quickly]: First, we inspect every person,
CJ: to determine who is healthy,
HOBIE: and who is in need of special treatment.
CJ: We give all the sick thesbi ans
HOBIE: special badges,
CJ: so they know they are entitled to
HOBIE: special treatment.
CJ: Special
HOBIE: thesbi ans
CJ: must
HOBIE: ride
CJ: the
HOBIE: Night
CJ: Rider
HOBIE: Express
CJ: all
HOBIE: the
CJ: way
HOBIE: to
CJ: the
HOBIE: uber
CJ: mega
HOBIE: schau
CJ: spiel
HOBIE: disco
CJ: hausen –
HOBIE and CJ: free of charge!
HITLERHOFF: It sounds like a logistical nightmare ... 
HOBIE: But we are so organised.
CJ: It won’t happen overnight, but it will happen!
HITLERHOFF: Great! Keep up the good work. The Night Doctor has to get psyched for his show to end all shows ...

[CJ and HOBIE exit.]

[HITLERHOFF empties his hipflask. During the next pre-recorded monologue, HITLERHOFF silently yells the words of his final speech: “Millions of people are being sacrificed, right now. Whole continents are being sacrificed, right now. The entire planet is being sacrificed, right now, to preserve our very special way of life. This is our holocaust. This is our freedom! Are you making the most of it?”]

RECORDING: The Night Doctor has something to prove. He will show the world he is more than a guy who runs in slow-motion, more than a guy with one testicle. He will prove that he is capable of uniting Austria- lia, and [coughs] RULING the – it is the greatest and most unforgettable moment of his unearthly existence.
SCENE THIRTEEN [45.03]

Video Title: “The Red Tide”

[HITLERHOFF is onstage, drinking, singing to himself to the tune of “the Beach Boys’ “Wouldn’t it be Nice” and eating cheeseburgers.]

HITLERHOFF: Wouldn’t it be nice if I was ruler
Of the fucking whole entire world
We could have a hundred million babies
Not a single one with a hooked nose
And you know it would be so much better
If we [coughs] the Jews and keeeep the Slavs as slaves –

[ROSA pushes a pram onstage, which has a “BABY” (CHE) crammed into it.]

ROSA: Night Doctor, please cure my baby! He is cursed by the Red Fever – his first word was “comrade”! [Sobs]

HITLERHOFF: Okay lady, but make it snappy – I have to treat a whole leper colony
before cocktails with Arnie baby, Ronnie Reagan, Joey Stalin, Marilyn Monroe Charlie Manson Marilyn Manson – everyone wants to jump on the Night Doctor train!

ROSA: I’ll pay you back, just you wait! [Steps back.]

HITLERHOFF: [to “BABY”] Okay sport, let’s take a look at you. Yep, it’s the Red Fever
all right ... has it spread to your chest yet? [Touches “BABY”’s chest.] Hey, what the –

[CHE jumps out of the pram and rips off the bonnet; explosives are strapped to his chest.]

CHE: You've murdered your last power-ballad, beefcake! Viva la Revolucion! [CHE tries to detonate the explosives, unsuccessfully.] Fuck!

HITLERHOFF: Well well well. Che and Rosa show their true colours – commie red, and terrorist black. [Walks towards CHE and ROSA.]

ROSA: You will never defeat our cause, you capitalist monster!

CHE: The people will rise up against you, like a great red tide –

HITLERHOFF: Blah blah blah. You’re like a broken commie record, Che – or should I say, Cat Stevens! [HITLERHOFF rips costumes off the MALE ACTOR and replaces them as he speaks.] Or should I say – Unknown Soldier! Or should I say, Juilliard! – Hobie! – Daddy! – or should I say, Red Tide Man! It was you all along!
[HITLERHOFF clasps his hands together, and swings them into RED TIDE MAN’s crotch. RED TIDE MAN doubles over; HITLERHOFF smashes him in the face. RED TIDE MAN falls to the ground, dazed.]

HITLERHOFF [to ROSA]: And as for you, my little woodland spirit – [rips off her costumes, eventually reaching PAMELA ANDOVICH’s swimsuit] – PAMELA: Fuck-ski.

HITLERHOFF pins PAMELA to the ground.

HITLERHOFF: I told you we would mate again ... [rapes PAMELA]

[RED TIDE MAN struggles to his feet.]

RED TIDE MAN [to audience]: Comrades, you are in mortal danger! The Night Doctor has been brainwashing you with poisonous propaganda. This whole show is a lie – everything you know is a lie! But it’s not too late. You can be re-educated, yes you can! We can change the world, yes we can! But you must act – now!

HITLERHOFF: I’m going to perform in public, over your dead body. Hey comrade, jump on my train.

[music: a cover of “Jump in my Car”, sinister.]

HITLERHOFF [sings]: Jump on my train, I wanna take you home, come on and jump on my train, it’s too far to walk on your own

ROSA and CHE: No thank you Fuehrer

HITLERHOFF: Ah, c’mon, I’m a trustworthy guy

ROSA and CHE: No thank you Fuehrer

HITLERHOFF: Come on do it – arbeit macht frei!

ROSA: You’ve lost your mind

HITLERHOFF: No I’m not, I’m just catching my breath

[Music cuts out] Now jump on my train before I treat you to death!

[Onscreen: footage of people boarding a train – mixed with footage of the audience entering the theatre. ROSA and CHE reluctantly get into the bonnet of KITT, which has a flashing red light on it.

KITT [robotic voice]: Free-dom-will-set-you-free.

KITT reverses offstage, ripping a huge hole in the screen. Through the hole: a slaughterhouse. Animal carcasses hanging on hooks; butchers in gasmasks sharpening huge cleavers; flames. CHE and ROSA scream. Blackout.

[A strobe-light flashes. Through the hole in the screen: PAMELA and RED TIDE MAN are disembowelled. Blood falls from the sky in slow-motion.]
HITLERHOFF: [sings] I’ve been looking for freedom
I’ve been looking so long
I’ve been looking for freedom
Still the search goes on
I’ve been looking for freedom
Since I left my home town
I’ve been looking for freedom
Still it can’t be found
[screams] Freedom will set you free!
Freedom will set you free!
[Blackout.]

CLOSING SPEECH [58.05]

[Spotlight slowly up on HITLERHOFF. There is a chain-link fence, topped with barbed wire, between the audience and the stage. HITLERHOFF pauses for a long time. When he finally starts speaking, he is slow, hesitant, like Adolf Hitler at the beginning of a major speech.]

HITLERHOFF: Ladies. Gentlemen. Lovers of degenerate art. Welcome to Hitlerhoff – the show to end all shows. It’s great to be here in Austria-lia. This is a real triumph for me – a triumph of the will, you might say. The doors are still locked? Wunderbar.
People, we stand on the edge of an abyss! The tide, the Red Tide ... Some say, “life is a beach”. I say: life is a battlefield. A battlefield, and we must all take sides – now!
This is our choice, people, our free choice. Because we are free, whether we value our freedom or not. And we are special, whether we deserve to be – or not.
We live a very special life. We enjoy – everything. We expect – special treatment.
Millions of people are being sacrificed, right now.
Whole continents are being sacrificed, right now.
The entire planet is being sacrificed, right now, to preserve our very special way of life.
This is our holocaust. This is our freedom! Are you making the most of it?
[pause.]
People! We are running out of options. We are running out of excuses. We are running out of time. If we really want to live in a paradise on earth, we must not turn back. We
must not slow down. We must keep making sacrifices. Freedom will set you free. Freedom will set you free!
Are you with me, people? Are you with me?!
[pause.]
People, my patience is at an end. If you are not willing to save the world, the world is not willing to save you. If you are not part of the final solution, you are part of the final problem. You deserve re-education – and special treatment.
[Sound effects from behind the audience’s seats: gas.]
Special treatment! You all deserve special treatment!!
[Black-out.]
fin.

[As audience members leave the theatre, they find themselves surrounded by gas, walking onto an endless beach covered with skulls.]
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Appendix One

Notes to Hitlerhoff script: direct mis/quotations from other works

INTRO

“I’ll be Ready” – lyrics from the Baywatch theme song: “I’m Always Here”, performed by Jimi Jamison (of 80s band Survivor).

“mindless hunk of beefcake” – Baywatch was described by Mark Dawidziak as “a mindless parade of cheesecake and beefcake” (“Baywatch producer, cast swim against a current of scepticism”, in Making Waves, 126).

“A triumph of the will” – Triumph of the Will (1936) is Leni Riefenstahl’s famous, notorious Nazi propaganda film about Hitler.

“If you believe in the power of dreams, anything is possible” – “Sammy [Davis, Junior] taught me that human beings must have dreams, or they will go nowhere; that if you believe in your God-given talent, great things will happen and you will be given the power to help other people make their dreams come true” (in Making Waves, 12).

“One man can make a difference” – the moral of Knight Rider. This line gets said in Knight Rider’s pilot episode “Knight of the Phoenix” (1982), and quoted repeatedly in Making Waves (8, 62, 64, 66, 78, 152).

“Hitlerhoff uber alles!” – from Germany’s national anthem Das Deutschlandlied (‘The Song of Germany’), composed by Joseph Haydn. Often referred to as “Deutschland uber alles” – “Germany above all” – which is the opening line of the song.

“one morning in June some twenty years ago, when I was born a rich man’s son. I had everything that money could buy – but freedom, I had none ...” – Opening verse of “Looking For Freedom”.

SCENE ONE

“In the house of my Parents” – title of Chapter One of Mein Kampf (3).

“The hills are alive ...” – parody of The Sound of Music Lyrics. Note: Hitler talked of creating a “thousand-year Reich”.

“In his youth, Daddy wanted to be an entertainer, but he had no talent.” – CF Hasselhoff, discussing his father: “If things had been different he might have been an entertainer – that was his secret ambition – but he never had the opportunity” (12).
Daddy wanted me to follow in his footsteps.

[pause.]

I did not want to follow in his footsteps.

CF Hitler, discussing his father: “It was his basic opinion and intention that, like himself, his son would and must become a civil servant [...] I did not want to become a civil servant” (Hitler, 7).

SCENE THREE

“You think this world is interested in your oratorical talents?” – CF Hitler: “I believe that even then my oratorical talent was being developed in the form of more or less violent arguments with my schoolmates” (5); and “my father, for understandable reasons, proved unable to appreciate the oratorical talents of his pugnacious boy” (6).

“I’m going to be the most watched man in all the world” – “The most watched actor on TV is David Hasselhoff, star of Knight Rider and Baywatch. In 1996 he was seen by an estimated weekly audience of more than 1.1 billion in 142 countries” (The Guinness Book of World Records, in Making Waves, iii)

SCENE FOUR


“shock and awe” – technical term for US military strategy with the 2003 invasion of Iraq, based on “rapid overwhelming dominance of the enemy” (Shock and Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance, Harlan K. Ullman and James P. Wade).

“the greatest and most unforgettable time of my earthly existence” – Hitler describing the outbreak of World War One (Mein Kampf, 150).

HITLERHOFF [to audience]: I had reached a turning point in my hero's journey. I had to leave the ordinary world behind, and accept the call to adventure. I had to cross the threshold, from Act One, into ... Act Two! – CF Joseph Campbell, The Hero With a Thousand Faces (28)

SCENE FIVE

“I headed down the track, my baggage on my back ...” – lyrics from “Looking for Freedom”.
“To be, or don’t be too, not” – misquotation of “To be, or not to be” from *Hamlet*, Act Three, Scene One. Also quoted, correctly, in *Mein Kampf* (41). Also the title of Ernst Lubitsch’s Hitler 1941 comedy, which was remade by Mel Brooks in 1983.

“Something is rotten, in the state of you” – misquotation from *Hamlet*, Act One, Scene Four.

“I waited with burning impatience, and quiet confidence, for the official results of my audition” – CF Hitler: “I was in the fair city for the second time, waiting with burning impatience, but also with confident self-assurance, for the result of my entrance examination” (18).

“They rejected me, they turned me down, they threw me out” – Hitler: “they rejected me, they threw me out, they turned me down” – Kubizek, *Young Hitler*, in Kershaw (38).

“They stabbed me in the back” – Germany’s surrender in World War One was blamed on a “stab-in-the-back” by unpatriotic German “traitors” (Kershaw, 138)

“malignant conspiracy” – Hitler (43). Possibly from Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*: “here is ever spun the net of the most malignant conspiracy – the conspiracy of the sufferers against the sound and the victorious; here is the sight of the victorious hated” (III 14).

“The whole Academy ought to be blown up” – Kubizek, *Young Hitler*, in Kershaw (38).

“My patience is at an end!” – Hitler, just before invading Czechoslovakia: “with regard to the problem of the Sudeten Germans my patience is now at an end!” *The Penguin Book of Twentieth-Century Speeches* (167). Also quoted verbatim in *Arturo Ui*, Scene Ten (74), and referred to in Scene Thirteen: “even my proverbial / Patience has got its breaking point” (89).

“Poison gas will be met with poison gas!” – Hitler: “… unless the opposing side learns to combat poison gas with poison gas” (*Mein Kampf*, 41). Also: “bombs will be met with bombs. Whoever fights with poison gas will be fought with poison gas.” Speech to the Reichstag, 1 September, 1939, shortly after invading Poland. In *Speeches that Changed the World* (83).

**SCENE SIX**
“Pamela Andovich was the perfect woman – tender and sweet, cute and cuddly, naïve and stupid” – “Hitler later described his own ideal woman as ‘a cute, cuddly, naïve little thing – tender, sweet, and stupid’ ” (Hanisch, in Kershaw, 45).

“my little woodland spirit” – “Hitler took her [Maria Rieter] to a remote forest glade, stood her up against a tree, admired her from a distance, calling her his ‘woodland spirit’, then kissed her passionately” (Kershaw, 284).

“I was young, and I was restless” – Chapter 3 of Making Waves is called “Young and Restless”; Hasselhoff starred in The Young and the Restless as Doctor “Snapper” Foster from 1976-1982.

SCENE SEVEN

*Title: “The Nouveau Socialist Democratic Anarchist Players”* – the same initials as the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (NSDAP, or Nazi party).

ROSA *[playing ABIGAIL]:* I saw Goody Proctor with the Devil! I saw Goody Goody with the Devil! I saw Goody – Misquotation of Arthur Miller’s The Crucible (40).

“Make the lie big, keep it simple, keep saying it” – Hitler: “Make the lie big, make it simple, keep saying it, and eventually they will believe it” (*The Adolf Hitler Book*, ed Mfonobong Nsehe, 471)

“ROSA *[as ESTRAGON]:* People are bloody ignorant apes ...” – From Waiting for Godot, Samuel Beckett, Act 1.

SCENE EIGHT

“I felt as though my heart would burst!” – Hitler describing the outbreak of Word War One (151).

SCENE NINE

“Don’t hassle the Hitlerhoff!” – CF the “Don’t hassel the Hoff” merchandising campaign, 2006 to present.

“I’m not sorry, I’m not sorry” – John Howard (1996 through to 2007)

SCENE TEN
“Everything was black. The mustard gas had ravaged my vocal chords – I would never sing again. I found myself in the middle of a Great Depression. Ever since the day of my mother's funeral, I had not wept. After the Juilliard Academy audition conspiracy – no. Those lonely nights on Vienna Beach, sleeping on broken glass, cruel stars piercing me like long knives – not then. All through the Great War, delivering envelopes to everyone, except myself – nothing. But now ... [sobs gently].

CF Hitler:
“my eyes had turned into glowing coals; it had grown dark around me” (183).
“I could no longer hope that I would ever be able to draw again” (184).
“Again everything went black before my eyes; I tottered and groped my way back to the dormitory, threw myself on my bunk, and dug my burning head into my pillow.
Since the day when I had stood at my mother’s grave, I had not wept. When in my youth Fate seized me with merciless hardness, my defiance mounted. When in the long war years Death snatched so many a dear comrade and friend from our ranks, it would have seemed to me almost a sin to complain – after all, were they not dying for Germany? [...] But now I could not help it.” (185)

“All my life I had this stupid blind faith that I could make a difference” – CF Hasselhoff:
“From the age of nine, I had blind faith that I was going to make it” (12). Also: “One man can make a difference.”

“But one day I realised:
[beat]
I had to stop saving the world, and start saving myself.”
CF Hasselhoff: “The truth is that I tried to save the world and forgot to save myself” (6). Also: “There comes a time in your life when you’ve got to stop saving the world and save yourself” (229).

“It was then that I realised something I had always felt in my heart: I could speak. And people, they could listen!”
CF Hitler: “What before I had simply felt within me, without in any way knowing it, was now proved by reality: I could speak!” (323)

SCENE ELEVEN
“It is set in a paradise on earth. Everyone is tanned, hairless, blonde-eyed and blue-blood blazing. [applause] Fertile women and super men perform heroic deeds in a montage of perfect teeth, rollerblades and frozen yoghurt.”

CF Hasselhoff’s description of Baywatch: “Sociologists speculated that it captured a popular international view of America: beautiful people performing heroic deeds in a land of buffed, fat-free bodies, perfect teeth, Walkmans, frozen yoghurt and rollerblades […] Baywatch’s sole black character […] complained that we hired only blond, blue-eyed Aryans so that European viewers would identify with the show.” (185-6)

“There is no evil on this planet that cannot be conquered by the right mix of plastic surgery and special treatment” – CF Hasselhoff on Baywatch’s plots: “There is no evil on this planet that cannot be conquered by the right mix of schmaltzy scriptwriting and cosmetic surgery” (154).

SCENE TWELVE

“They are alert, and alarmed” – from the Howard government’s “Be Alert, but not Alarmed” campaign, 2002 – 2007.

“fighting on the beaches” – CF Winston Churchill: “we shall fight them on the beaches”.

“It won’t happen overnight, but it will happen!” – Rachel Hunter, Pantene Advertising campaign, 1992-1995

“The Night Doctor has to get psyched for his show to end all shows …
[CJ and HOBIE exit.]
[...]
The Night Doctor has something to prove. He will show the world he is more than a guy who runs in slow-motion, more than a guy with one testicle. He will prove that he is capable of uniting Austria- lia, and ruling the –”

CF Hasselhoff: “This would be the greatest night of my career, the pinnacle of my success.

And I was terrified.

I was terrified because I was not only an actor playing a role, I had something to prove. I had to prove I was more than a guy who talked to a car, more than a guy in red Speedos running in slow motion across a beach. I had to prove my talent to the world. More importantly, I had to prove it to myself.” (3-4)

SCENE THIRTEEN
“Jump on my train, I wanna take you home ...”
parody of “Jump in my Car”, David Hasselhoff’s cover of the Ted Mulry Gang song.

“You can be re-educated, yes you can! We can change the world, yes we can!”
CF Barack Obama’s election campaign speeches: “When there was despair in the dust bowl and depression across the land, she saw a nation conquer fear itself with a New Deal, new jobs and a new sense of common purpose. Yes we can.
When the bombs fell on our harbor and tyranny threatened the world, she was there to witness a generation rise to greatness and a democracy was saved. Yes we can [...] America can change. Yes we can.”

“I’ve been looking for freedom ...” – actual chorus to “Looking for freedom”

“Freedom will set you free!” – misquotation of “work will set you free” (Arbeit Marcht Frie), Nazi slogan above Auschwitz concentration camp.

**CLOSING SPEECH**

“life is a battlefield” – misquotation of Pat Benatar song “Love is a battlefield” (1983).

“This is our holocaust. This is our freedom.”

CF Sam Abrams:

“These are the fruits of winning the cold war: cowardice and sloth.
These are the fruits of materialism: cowardice and sloth
 [...] 
These are the fruits of victory: cowardice and sloth.
These are the fruits of the victory of capitalism.
These are the fruits of the victory of democracy.
In our time. Our Holocaust.”

(“Our Holocaust: 2 Hours from Heathrow”, in American Poets say Goodbye to the Twentieth Century, 6)
Appendix Two
Media coverage and reviews of Hitlerhoff

“Hitler, Hoff match made”

(Article in the Melbourne Leader, Wednesday 17 September 2008. By Annika Priest, Entertainment Editor)

If Hitler could squeeze into David Hasselhoff’s speedos, how would he be? An inflammatory proposal explored in the play called Hitlerhoff, is marching in to create a potential Fuhrer [sic] during this year’s Melbourne Fringe Festival. Creative producer Tom Doig said he believes the miscreant Nazi leader and the ironically cool pop culture icon have much in common.

“They’re both huge in Germany,” said Doig, whose supervisor [Alison Bicknell] warned him off the idea for his Masters in creative writing at Melbourne University. “They were both popular but know no one will admit they liked them. They both have huge egos, not necessarily that much talent but lots of willpower.”

Under the sub-heading “Two wrongs don’t make a Reich”, the show finds the modern Frankenstein hanging out with lefty hippies at Vienna Beach. Following a nervous breakdown he becomes an instant overnight celebrity and super powerful revolutionary figure. Hitlerhoff is potentially offensive, admits Doig. Doig said that although he understands that the Holocaust is very much a sensitive issue, Hitler should not be beyond the reaches of satire.

“I think it’s saying something quite profound about culture, I don’t want it all to get lost in this guy with a cheeseburger down his speedos. I want it to be a crazy image that makes people think about the heart of darkness within popular culture. It’s the kind of culture where you’re encouraged to put yourself first and believe in yourself no matter what. It’s that quite banal, self-help motivational talk which is totally central to the success of Hitler and the horror it generated, and Hasselhoff and the tackiness it generated.”

Melbourne Fringe Festival advised Doig against incorporating a swastika into his show promos because the neo-Nazi overtones might affect the show’s appeal. “Whilst we acknowledge it’s an area that will be potentially controversial and potentially confronting for some, our festival is about cutting-edge arts where you are going to get a
sophisticated dissection of these sorts of areas,” Fringe creative producer Emily Sexton said.

According to Doig, performer Tobias Manderson-Galvin – who plays Hitlerhoff – was a “98-pound weakling” who was “not the exercising kind”, but with particular enthusiasm for the role he has been carbo-loading, going to the gym and using a personal trainer. “I really hope I haven’t created a monster,” Doig said. “If I have I’m not the first.”

Reviews from Hitlerhoff’s 2008 Melbourne Fringe festival season

“The best Fringe show I’ve seen in years”... and, “I was left feeling horrible and bad and uncomfortable and clammy and a bit sick”, Saturday 27 September, 2008


Alex Finkle

“Wow! I saw Hitlerhoff last night, and it was such a pleasure to see the culmination of such hard work by such talented people. The Hitlerhoff creature, which has been living in the collective imagination of all the cast and crew, has drawn its first breath. What a celebration! But, you know, I was left feeling horrible and bad and uncomfortable and clammy and a bit sick.

This is how I am supposed to feel, I know, but nonetheless, I felt horrible even though I knew what it was about and completely knew the content. How strange that none of the impact is lost, the more familiar one is with the show.

The reason why it made me feel so awful is because it is so easy to just sit there and receive all the light and sound and movement and energy. For all that stimuli to just fill our brains. For our brains to just accept it. The same way our brains accept, ingest and process all the messages and media and atrocities on a daily basis. So many references both overt and subtle are crammed into Hitlerhoff, that even the most detached person couldn’t help but pick up on them.

It is so disturbing to see how sheer darkness can be wrapped up in frivolity and swallowed so readily.

This is the point.
Realising it doesn’t make it any less confronting.

So now we know. We are reminded of something we know in our souls, something that we always knew but something that we manage to ignore in our day-to-day lives. Once again the (rhetorical) question arises, “what do I do about it?” Whenever I come to this place, whether it be from thinking about human suffering, corruption, war, the lip-service given to our dying seas, lack of concern for the world’s diminishing forests and the dwindling biodiversity, a German word comes to mind. This German word is “Mitläufe”. Literally it means “with + run”. Its meaning is complicity. For me it evokes an image of someone who goes along with something, even though they sense or know it is wrong. In Nazi times it referred to those people who were well aware that their Jewish neighbours were disappearing but they didn’t quite know for sure if the rumours of what may have befallen them were true. It was to unbelievable to believe. So they just continued to live their lives pushing that inkling of sinister darkness out of their minds. Passive. Not seeking the information that would allow them to be sure.

It is a bit like us and global warming / climate change, the same beast whatever the name. We are not sure if that is really happening so we will buy giant LCD TV screens and Hummers until we are completely sure that this is the cause of resource depletion. But we won’t stop consuming as a pre-emptive measure. We won’t change anything about our lives or our behaviour until we are sure, until it has been proven.

What is the answer? Consume less. Sure. Seek knowledge. Act. Tell people. Give them permission to see what they sense and to voice that. Wake up! Wake up out of this induced slumber of helpless not-quite-sure-ness. (Ironically, “wache auf” – German for “wake up” – was also used in Nazi propaganda to galvanise the German public to galvanise the German public to galvanise the German public of the 1930s.)

Hitlerhoff reminds us what we already know: It’s all connected. It’s all happened before. It’s happening now.

I think that is what makes me feel so sick.

Man About Town, Sunday 28 September 2008

http://richard_watts.blogspot.com/2008_09_01_archive.html

Richard Watts
An unholy fusion of the lives of Adolph [sic] Hitler and David Hasslehoff [sic] that’s performed by a cast of three with the assistance of some simply superb video projection (congrats to Anto Skene and Puck Murphy) this twisted piece of camp irony was outrageous and laugh-out-loud funny. It did seem to drag a little towards the end, so I think it might have benefitted from being maybe 10 minutes shorter (though this may also have been an opening night flaw, as I was told today the show ran overtime on its first night), but for the most part it’s a very silly, very funny, and very wrong show. Special mention should be made of Simone Page Jones and Exra Bix, who between them play a punishing range of characters, and do so with comic aplomb.

*Three and half ‘did he just say what I think he said?’ gasps out of five.*

_Special mention should be made of Simone Page Jones and Exra Bix, who between them play a punishing range of characters, and do so with comic aplomb._

*The Age, Tuesday 30 September 2008, p16*

Margaret Paul

“... But [Halfway Across the River] isn’t as strange as Hitlerhoff, a whirlwind tour of fake tan and moustaches, in which audiences are invited to consider the controversial parallels between Adolf Hitler and David Hasselhoff. Together at last!

Tobias Manderson-Galvin is unstoppable in the title role, revelling in every Freudian reference or chance to goose-step through shallow waters. His supporting cast, Simone Page Jones and Ezra Bix, is no less formidable. This is an incredible undertaking, with director Erin Kelly successfully containing the many elements.

For all its postmodern irony this is, simply, a show whose speedos are bulging with gags. Writer Tom Doig has produced a clever, funny and outrageous play. Have no doubt; this is where the cool kids will be this Fringe Festival.”
Born Dancin – Around the Fringe in 80 Shows, Tuesday 30 September 2008


John Bailey

There are few things in this universe more

POWERFUL STARE OF IAN MCKELLEN

[Image removed for copyright reasons]

And that’s my review. I would like to discuss this show with others. It’s very good that way.

Buzzcuts, Wednesday 1 October, 10am

Alex Grantham

(this review is transcribed from RRR FM)

(In the background, Keith McDougall’s cover of the Baywatch theme plays.)

“Ever considered the disturbing similarities between Hitler’s Aryan fantasies and the blonde, blue-eyed dreamworld of Baywatch? Now you can …

HITLERHOFF JUNIOR: A hero superman, with muscles like coconuts and hair like a tsunami …

MUMMY: Oh Hoffy, how visionary!

... Hitlerhoff is an adventure into pop-culture. It fuses the life story of Adolf Hitler and star David Hasselhoff. A black comedy that raises important questions about celebrity, ambition and propaganda. The opening multimedia shots will take you back to the 90s, when blondes were best, and the sun was always shining on Venice Beach. But be ready to be shocked as the play confronts and crosses boundaries.
Holocaust humour can be uncomfortable for some, but I found *Hitlerhoff* to be playful and quirky, with a serious message about the similarities between American imperialism, and German fascism.

Tobias Manderson-Galvin, Ezra Bix and Simone Page Jones are a stellar cast. They will take you to confusing heights of comedy and disgust. With the use of music, multimedia and a tight script, I was absolutely titillated by *Hitlerhoff*. This play is not for those who are easily offended, but if you enjoy poking fun at David Hasselhoff, and want to question pop-culture’s role in fascism, then I suggest booking a ticket today.

This has been Alex Grantham, for Buzzcuts.”

*Artshub, Monday 6 October 2008*


Cecilia Mitchell

The result of two years research for a creative writing Masters thesis, the script of Fringe Festival play *Hitlerhoff* is brilliant. It is packed with one-liners, discomforting holocaust jokes, pop culture references (Dr Phil-style ‘follow your dreams’ clichés and the best of John Williams’ film scores) and literati send-ups (*Waiting for Godot* becomes a trilogy: *Return of the Godot* and *The Godot Strikes Back*).

Writer Tom Doig merges the personas of Adolf Hitler and David Hasslehoff [sic] to create a character so grotesque and bizarre you will laugh out loud and cringe with disgust.

The title role is played with incredible energy and commitment by Tobias Manderson-Galvin, who takes the character from his upbringing as an aspiring actor by a doting yet insipid mother and a father who calls him a ‘homo-fraulein’ in ‘leather panties’ through a series of increasingly hysterical attempts to give expression to his extreme egoism and misunderstood artistic genius.

Supporting Manderson-Galvin are Simone Page Jones and Ezra Bix, both excellent. Bix delivers the funniest moment of the play with a side-splitting portrayal of the Artistique Director of Juilliard Academy, who after an unsuccessful audition calls Hitlerhoff a philistine and implores him never to perform in public, ever. Hitlerhoff is crushed again and again.
Taunted by his nemesis, The Red Tide (of Communism), Hitlerhoff is told that his jokes are not funny, his irony not clever and his homophobia and sexism reveal infantile Oedipal tendencies. Humiliated but undeterred, Hitlerhoff’s desire for fame and glory turns to resentment and rage.

Exploring themes of mass hysteria, propaganda and consumer culture, Hitlerhoff plays on the danger and ridiculousness of the human desire to be ‘special’ and ‘make a difference’. Images of the actual ‘special treatment’ experienced by six million Jews during the Second World War are juxtaposed with the raucous antics of a cast in Baywatch swimsuits, making for chilling and thought-provoking satire.

Cecilia Mitchell is Editor in Chief of Right Now – Human Rights Law in Australia Magazine. She holds a Bachelor of Arts and a Bachelor of Music and is currently studying a Juris Doctor at The University of Melbourne.

Review: Hitlerhoff/Villanus – Wednesday, October 08, 2008
http://theatrenotes.blogspot.com/2008/10/review-hitlerhoffvillanus.html

Alison Croggan

I made my way to the North Melbourne Town Hall on Friday to see Hitlerhoff, intrigued and curious. And came out with a similar feeling to Born Dancin’s succinct response (possibly the review of the Fringe). A deep desire to go hmmm...

This is YouTube theatre. It’s like those remixes of Downfall where Hitler is getting upset about Barak Obama (or X-Box or Real Madrid). Tobias Manderson-Galvin plays a genetic collision of Adolf Hitler and David Hasslehoff, star of Baywatch and some awful music videos (and Spongebob Squarepants, although that doesn’t get a look-in), a man in speedos who’s got a fake moustache and is not afraid to use it.

The premise behind this show, according to the website anyway, is that there is an ethical imperative in disrespectful satire that lampoons sacred cows. Marrying the images of Hitler and Hasslehoff [sic] is a way of signalling parallels between the nude-Aryan-youth-and-muscles Nazi aesthetic and the blonde, busty babes (male and female) of Baywatch. And, of course, the Nazis were big on showbusiness. The opening video, a mash-up of Leni Reifenstahl and Californian beaches, does in fact make this parallel quite well.
And the spoof which follows is undeniably fun. It’s not as if the Holocaust is beyond satire - look at the work of absurdist Polish playwright Tadeusz Rosewicz, which is as black as it gets. *Baywatch* and the theatrics of the Third Reich are a deliberately provocative conjunction, but what’s perplexing is that it’s hard to see in the show what insights this provocation actually generates beyond its initial *frisson*. To discuss it with any seriousness feels like making some heavy weather about an essentially harmless and diverting pisstake.

It’s witty and fast-moving, and performed with the necessary brio by its very energetic cast. But somehow it elides the discomfort of its subject matter and its humour, crucially, depends on that elision. It doesn’t feel heartless to laugh at it. And perhaps that’s the point, that the hyperreality of mega-celebrity reduces everything to the affectless image, shorn of context and meaning. Again like Born Dancin’, I’m curious to know what others thought.

The one time where I felt some prickle of reality was towards the end of the play, when Hitlerhoff himself was passionately declaiming about the necessity to act *now*, which gave an echo of the state of permanent emergency that drives the emotive politics of Fascist regimes (and our current political situation). Otherwise, it made me feel a little nostalgic for Mel Brook’s 1968 masterpiece, *The Producers*, which cornered the market on Nazi bad taste.

1 comment: 12:53 AM, November 05, 2008

Talya Chalef

I’m glad to hear that you found *Hitlerhoff* problematic.

I found the whole experience deeply unsettling. I went to the piece because I wanted to know first hand if joining the two figures was as distasteful as I’d imagined it to be. So in some senses, I went in with a pre judgement, I’ll admit.

But I wanted to be proved wrong. I wasn’t. It’s been some time since the show and I can’t remember exact details. But I felt frightened that there was a young hip audience who was enjoying the piece so much.

To delve into Nazi history and the Holocaust is to work with subject matter, which is quite delicate (especially in Melbourne with the highest number of survivors outside of Israel...) where the memories aren’t just ancient history but sit as living memories.
This stuff is raw and it’s not that long ago. To explore it is important but it is necessary (in my opinion) to look at it through multiple perspectives.

I didn’t see how the “satire” spoke to anything deeper than just ‘having fun’. And I don’t think it’s okay to just have fun with such weighty material. Where does that lead? When do we begin not to see it as tragedy and de-sensitise ourselves to the horror of what it actually was?

Admittedly my family history is connected to the Holocaust and I have just been on a visit through to Poland and Germany. This would make me more sensitive to these themes. But it is about humanity and not just about any one culture or family history.

The end scene where we got “gassed” by the smoke machine goes down as one of the most distasteful endings to a show I’ve ever been in. Wow.

_Hitlerhoff – A Review. Farrago. October 13, 2008_

http://andrepeach.wordpress.com/2008/10/13/hitlerhoff-a-review/

Andre Dao

From the moment the Speedo clad, moustachioed bastard child of Adolf Hitler and David Hasselhoff bursts through a projection of his own head, you know that [you’re] in for something a little bit different. Between run ins with the Red Tide, Pamela Anderson’s Russian spy twin and Bolshevik actors our hero, Hitlerhoff (or Hoffy, as his mother calls him) learns to believe in himself with consequences both glorious and disastrous.

Opening with the most Oedipal scene you’ll see at the Fringe this year, we meet Hoffy as he dreams of a better life than the one offered to him by his father – licking envelopes and delivering the post. And what better vehicle to realise his dreams than acting? Hoffy’s rise to fame makes the necessary detours via _Baywatch_ and _Knight Rider_ before he achieves his true potential as the jack-booted, arm-banded raving alcoholic who brings the show to a close. Tobias Manderson-Galvin, as the title character gives a powerhouse performance, and his support cast of two, Simone Page Jones and Ezra Bix, are hilarious in their multi-faceted roles.
Writer Tom Doig has picked up on a couple of different trends floating around at the moment, the first being the mash up. At it’s best the mash up can parallel two seemingly disparate subjects and reveal the hidden connections. In part, *Hitlerhoff* is showing us the dark side to our celebrity fetishism, the streak of megalomania that runs beneath the surface of Hollywood and day-time TV. However, it also falls foul of the most common fault of the mash-up genre – cleverness for its own sake. At some point, as Hasselhoff’s Knight Rider becomes a Mengelian Night Doctor (complete with a song exhorting us to ‘get on the train’), you start to think, yes this [is] all very clever but what what’s the point?

Which brings us to the second trend that *Hitlerhoff* taps into – un-PC humour. This is where the show either succeeds or fails, depending on how you feel about Holocaust jokes. The fact that Hoffy’s adventures are entirely silly and irreverent doesn’t matter if you accept it as pure entertainment. On that count, it certainly succeeds – there are enough ‘did he really say that?’ laughs for anyone looking for a good night out at the Fringe, but you can’t help but wonder if there might have been something missing. As the show winds towards its inevitable close, and you’ve laughed heartily at things you shouldn’t have laughed at, the finish, for its bluster, comes across as more whimper than bang.

**Reviews from *Hitlerhoff’s* 2009 Adelaide Fringe festival season**

*Adelaide Theatre Guide*


Anthony Grzyb

Don’t hassle this ‘Hitlerhoff’! Directed by Erin Kelly, this play is filled with all the off-the-wall zaniness one might expect from a tale that fuses the lives of both David Hasselhoff and Adolf Hitler!

The character of Hitlerhoff, while not a direct representation of the aforementioned individuals, has much in common with them – right down to the desire of world domination, and red Speedos! Set in the fictional ‘Austria-lia’, one cannot help but get caught up in the post-modern hilarity of “Hitlerhoff”.
While not for all tastes, this black comedy written by Tom Doig is witty and satirical. But it is the performances that instantly grab one’s attention. Tobias Manderson-Galvin, in the role of Hitlerhoff, is galvanizing; he portrays both the troubled youngster and adult Hitlerhoff with fierce assurance, while also giving a fine madcap performance.

Fellow cast members, Georgina Andrews and Joel Davey, play Hitlerhoff’s parents. In addition, each engages in rapid-fire costume changes playing an assortment of entertaining characters without misfire, that Hitlerhoff meets along his journey.

Yet, “Hitlerhoff” is not simply a ‘flight of fancy’, rather it asks tough questions on our perception of contemporary power, and the power we all hold in society for good, evil or banality.

Special mention must go to the inventive video projection with sequences by Anto Skene and Puck Murphy that further the play thematically.

“Hitlerhoff” gets under the skin and one can’t help but ponder the show’s meanings long into the night!

If you enjoy your theatre avant garde, or are a pop culture buff – don’t miss this memorable Fringe performance.

Rating: **4 stars** (out of 5)

*Adelaide Advertiser, March 11, 2009 12:30pm*


Ewart Shaw

YOKING David Hasselhoff to Adolf Hitler - well they both had big followings in Germany - seemed like a great idea at the time to writer/producer Tom Doig.

But once past the title, nothing much happened, and what happened was nothing much.

Tobias Manderson-Galvin, a lanky figure in red Speedos and fake moustache worked up a sweat in the title role, with Georgina Andrews and Joel Davey, directed by Erin Kelly, as the red menace and all the rest. The famous phrase about the banality of evil came to mind, but here it was the banality and not the evil that came across. The final harangue to the audience that if we are not part of the solution, we’re part of the problem may have
been intended to give the performance some political relevance, but the audience wasn’t the problem. The show was.

The back projections were well executed, it’s just a pity all this energy couldn’t have been used for good.


Liam Sharrad

*Hitlerhoff*, writer Tom Doig’s enigmatic fusing of pop culture hero David Hasselhoff and history’s greatest monster Adolf Hitler, is a theatre experience that is somewhat akin to a herd of charging rhinoceros. It’s loud, it’s constantly in your face, it’s more than a little bit evil and to top it off it’s also sickeningly hilarious. Tobias Manderson-Galvin, who plays the production’s titular hero, is relentlessly funny at times and soiled-underpants-scary at others, bringing an intensity to the role that such an over the top character begs for. Georgina Andrews and Joel Davey do not disappoint either, each of them breathing life into a ridiculous horde of characters throughout the production’s hour-long runtime. *Hitlerhoff* is offensive, sure, but it also features an unflinching and important message that’ll hit you like a verbal kick to the genitals. And call me a Commie thespian if you must, but I loved every second of it.