

INTRODUCTION

Reg's suggestion that I write something to go with my pictures immediately solved a problem I have with 'artspeak', which I often find a little confusing. Sometimes I even find myself beginning to wonder whether a writer conveying inflated opinions is enjoying the challenge of putting the opposite case, when really they loathe the work. But it also gives me the chance to jigsaw some words which I love doing as much as crazy paving shapes.

Words have been important partly because it is easier with them than with a picture to make someone laugh. Whether I am ever successful is a separate issue. My darling daughter once said she laughed at my letters. However, this was not because she found them funny, she said, but because she could hear me laughing at my own jokes.

From the age of about eleven into my twenties much of the time was spent in the half-light of a darkroom, a monochrome mole popping out in the sunlight to squint through an early Leica. Thus I was not only half-immersed in liquids but everything was tonal as I grew slightly taller. Prior to that, from about seven, I had tried my hand at conjuring, to the dismay of all cornered to watch a trick. Since magic was my first love and laughter is the latest, I thought maybe a closer look at the two might shed some light on the new obsession with humour.

Well, apart from Tommy Cooper and some of W. C. Fields, conjuring and humour don't usually go together. But what do a trick and a joke have in common? I suppose they both 'pull the wool', so maybe I've been going from an external deceit to an internal one, from sleight of hand to sleight of mind.

The most annoying thing about tricks is the blessed conjuror keeps a couple of cards close to his chest and more up his sleeve. A joke is given to us with all its workings. All the cards are laid on the table. Humour has a delightful transparency about it. The first part of the joke is stated simply, then neatly flipped like a pancake in our heads so the thing we understood to be 'A' turns out to have been 'B' all along. Comics generally share their material with us and they are very patient when we keep misinterpreting it. Added to this there is that dumb look on the comedian's face as they watch the pennies drop. An actual solid coin vanishes 'out there' in the conjuror's hands but the mechanism of the joke could be said to lie inside our heads. The comedian feeds us the wherewithal to make false assumptions then sits back and listens as all the little mousetraps go off in our heads. We sniff the bait, take it and 'WHANG'. The laugh comes as the trap goes off. With conjuring tricks though, the fact that one has fallen for something is really aggravating and to compound matters we want to know how it was done. It's even worse than a story with a bad ending. When a bunch of flowers is turned into a bird, our mouths open but no sound comes out. Comedians make us splutter.

Comedy and conjuring both depend to a large extent on language. The individual persona of the comedian dictates the kind of gun that's firing the bullets full of feathers that tickle us. But all those feathers are words. Conjurors also depend on language but their whimsical chatter, known as patter, is merely noise to occupy our brains. It's like the pickpocket who bumps a shoulder to cover the feel of the wallet lifted from a back pocket. The big knock takes all our attention. Patter distracts while a coin is slipped, a card swapped. Such language is the torch beam with which the conjuror blinds us.

What I say in writing seems then to have spread slowly out of meaningless patter into a particular area in which I feel more comfortable, philosophical farce. This allows me to move between the humourous and the serious, or more usually the other way around. Meanwhile, a love of the props and mechanisms of conjuring expresses itself in the

short films we throw on a sheet for people crammed in a darkened room as well as in hollow books, ones with moving parts operated by opening the cover.

Swinging between periods of writing and painting like an ape from branch to branch or as if suffering alternate bouts of malaria and impetigo, I've discovered ways of making myself laugh out loud, all on my own. I find it best to do this out of earshot of others because it can be upsetting for them. When you hear someone laughing alone you worry for them and you want to know what they are laughing about. Laughter attracts people and it also carries over a distance, so maybe it used to be an alarm, a dinner-gong in the jungle, one sounded to draw the rest of the tribe close to protect us from predators while we devoured the beast we'd just clubbed to death. The laugh is also a warning to our own predators to drop any idea that this is some kind of soup kitchen.

It seems to me that apart from advent calendars and pornographic scratch cards there are no sudden surprises in images, only gradual reveals and realisations. It is perhaps because, having come from conjuring, I prefer the more rapid quick change acts associated with humour. Arcimboldo's or Escher's double take imagery doesn't leave us curled up on the floor kicking with a pain in our ribs. I want people's mascara to run so they can't read the book on the train (thanks Roz). Which leads me to ask, well why bother do any paintings at all? The answer is simple: when I'm beginning to write in circles or even worse, spirals, I badly need to switch to a polarised activity. Images serve this purpose. I can feel the change occurring in my head. It's as though scenery is being shifted or a stage revolved. When being pulled into the sky in a glider, the tow-rope connected to the jeep on the runway transmits a terrific shuddering from the vehicle. But when the release lever is pulled in the glider and it lurches free, one experiences a dramatic silence. As the end of the tow-rope drops away on its little parachute, for a while, before one grows accustomed to it, the serenity is tangible. One never achieves that elevated calm when landing back on the noisy tarmac of text. Having tried to shed the conjuror's trickiness, as well as the cards held close to the chest and the whimsy of patter, the hope is to preserve some of the humour generated by writing, while soaring above the chatter of text, when the pointed nib has been dropped for the broader brush.

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