



THE USE OF HUMOUR TO OVERLOOK THE DARK REALITIES OF LIFE: A DRAMATIC STUDY IN SELECTED MODERN ENGLISH PLAYS

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Article history:	Abstract:
<p>Received: 10th February 2026 Accepted: 8th March 2026</p>	<p>Modern day dramatists have taken a big leap by using humour as the soul of their plays to lighten moods and make people to see the funny side of life in varied situations. Robert Askins, Laura Wade and Patrick Barlow have done exactly that. Through their plays, namely, <i>Hand to God</i>, <i>The 39 Steps</i> and <i>Home, I'm Darling</i> they have connected with the audiences in an emotional manner and emphasized the need of humour to survive the storms of life. Furthermore, the playwrights have endeavoured to arraign the beliefs held by people which are nothing but conventions that have been ingrained in the human consciousness – be it religion, family or simply living a life. Humour, is a serious art and the dramatists take it seriously to make the audiences overlook their anxieties and distresses through hearty laughter.</p>

Keywords: Humour, drama, life, entertainment, Broadway, theatre, playhouse, theme

INTRODUCTION

Patrick Barlow

A playwright at heart who has also tried his hand at acting and directing, Englishman Patrick Barlow wrote the parody play *The 39 Steps* which is an adaptation of John Buchan's novel that goes by the same name. It won him the Molière and Helpmann Award and an Oliver Award for 'Best New Comedy' besides being nominated for a Tony Award in the 'Best Play' category. His other hilarious adaptations include *A Christmas Carol* (2014) and *Ben Hur* (2015). He is well-known for his minimalist style where a single character has to play many characters. The dexterity he shows in making serious stories into outrageously funny tales is where his forte lies.

Robert Askins

Robert Askins is an American dramatist whose first play *Princes of Waco* (2009) received critical acclaim and put him on the list of the most promising playwrights. He gained further recognition with his one act play *Matthew and the Pastor's Wife* (2010). His career defining moment came with the success of his play *Hand to God* (2011). It was labelled as 'the most entertaining show' of 2014 and it premiered on Broadway in 2015 and was nominated in the category for best play at the Tony Awards. His play *Permission* (2015), a domestic comedy, explored the relationships between husbands and wives. Askins was awarded the Helen Merrill Emerging Playwright Award in 2012.

Laura Wade

As a prolific multi-award winning playwright, Laura Wade has experimented varied genres and has tasted success with each play. She has contributed to the world of theatre in many capacities and as a dramatist, has ventured into different territories. Wade started her career with *Limbo* (1996). Her plays *Colder Than Here* (2005) and *Breathing Corpses* (2005) were received warmly by theatregoers. She has successfully adapted novels into plays that include *Young Emma* (2003) and *Tipping Velvet* (2015). Laura's most famous and acclaimed work is *Home, I'm Darling* (2018), for which she won the Oliver Award for Best Comedy in 2019.

Barlow's Humour

To make the audiences laugh is an arduous task. But it comes naturally for playwrights like Barlow. The highlight of his humour is that he has penned parody plays of extremely serious works. In other words, he has been able to see the lighter side of epics like *Ben Hur* and *The 39 Steps*. Those original works present the dark realities of life which are witnessed by people and make them uptight while reading or watching them as movies. Barlow's skill is further enhanced as he has improvised on *The 39 Steps* which was already ridiculously funny in the four-actor version of Corble and Dimon that made its debut in 1996. That version was itself a parody adaptation of the Alfred Hitchcock movie of the same title, which in turn, was an adaptation of the 1915 novel of John Buchan. Barlow's comedic take succeeds due to "the accidental errors in the performance break down the illusion created by the text and relieve the spectators from the emotion of fear in Buchan's and Hitchcock's texts. Freed from the stressful emotion, the spectators experience a sense of relaxation. The comfort is expressed in the mood of humour in which the spectators laugh at the nerve-tightening plot." (Tan-Hsin, 2019, p.13).

To combine fear with laughter, and making the audiences see the mirthful aspect of an extremely grave and depressing situation and that too with just four characters – three men and a single woman – who combinedly play one hundred and thirty characters, speaks volumes of Barlow's innate talent. It is usually seen that comedy is bracketed under multiple categories, from slapstick to farce and from situational comedy to satire and that tends to limit the manner in which the playwright can elicit laughter from the audiences. And that creates a kind of repetitiveness that is not only tiresome to the audiences, but the play also loses its essence of comedy. Barlow breaks the mould and ventures into the minds of the audiences through improvisation and most importantly, by keeping them guessing about the arrival of the next burst of laughter. It's no wonder that upon its release, it was described as an "acrid comedy that will turn goose bumps into guffaws." (Isherwood, 2015, para. 3).

The plot revolves around the protagonist Richard Hannay who gets embroiled in the webs of espionage while other three characters change their identities like shape-shifters. That element adds to the dramas lifelike scenarios where people change themselves according to the situation. The playwright obviously knows the pulse of the audiences when it comes to comedy and has exploited it to the fullest. In Barlow's own words – "Audiences, regardless of nationality, all seem to love it and, amazingly, laugh and gasp at the same things. We did make a point of keeping the story truly exciting and genuinely suspenseful and not sending it up and audiences really like that." (Brooks, 2016, p.8). That statement reveals the foundation of Barlow's comedy style. He erases the gloominess and tenseness of the original and replaces it with humour that connects with the audiences across the world because humour speaks only one language – that of laughter.

Furthermore, Barlow is not just a playwright, but an actor too. Therefore, the comedy in *The 39 Steps* has been written with different perspectives and "the comic technique is the presentation of this perception in a way that points up what the comedian identifies as its humorous qualities. The technique is most commonly structural and verbal, although comedians emphasize and illustrate their jokes with facial expressions and their body language. Even the most inspired and best structured joke is usually most effective when delivered with the judgment and timing of a practiced comedian and when emerging convincingly from a natural or well realized comic persona." (Sturges, 2015, p.1). The whole point of that entire exercise is to give the audiences for what they have come for – laughter and freedom from their cares and worries. Plays like *The 39 Steps* may be labelled as spoofs and parodies and are easy targets for belittlement and even criticism but those forms of disapproval amount to nothing because what counts and matters are the joys that such plays bring to the audiences.

The production of Barlow's play under consideration had the simple objective of making the audiences realize that even in the stickiest of situations, life is not to be taken too seriously and that the approach taken to live it is what matters. The plot of the drama moves at an extremely fast pace that includes suspense, action and most importantly, comedy. That pace keeps the audiences riveted to the drama and the comical situations, even at the most serious of situations, makes the audience split into laughter. Barlow has the knack of inserting comedy where one least expects. The mystery keeps the audience on tenterhooks and the action between the four characters amuses them no end. What keeps the spectators glued is the speed at which the characters change themselves into someone else in a seamless way, without causing any hiccups to the flow of the drama.

Consequently, when all those elements are clubbed together, it results in the audiences letting slip of their day-to-day existence, and at the same time, invigorates their mind to get back to their lives. *The 39 Steps* has more to it than just entertainment and novelty. It has the right ingredients like genre pastiche, witty dialogues, and character overload. Theatregoers come to watch comedy dramas with the expectations of getting entertained with new plots and ideas. Though those expectations are reasonable, they are extremely difficult to fulfil. The reason being, comedy is not easy because, "without violating a norm or rule of some kind, a joke just isn't funny. But violations can't stray too far; otherwise, they become unappealing or even disgusting and upsetting. According to the researchers' Benign Violation Theory, a violation is humorous when it breaks a rule or norm but is benign." (Michel, 2017, para 27).

Ultimately, Barlow takes audiences where they themselves could not imagine. He takes them on a journey of wacky and crazy episodes which makes them laugh and brings an end to their dreary existence. So what if it's only for a period of two hours? The detachment of the mind with the mundane and its attachment to what energizes them is what matters. Barlow has the medicine for laughter, and the audiences enjoy taking big doses of it.

Askins Eliciting of Amusement and Laughter

Robert Askins has ventured into a sanctimonious and hallowed territory with his humorous play *Hand to God*. To make the holy, i.e., religion and its place of worship along the keepers of faith is at the bare minimum, a blasphemous act that can invite severe punishment in the books of those who are faithful. However, Askins has gone ahead with his task and written a play that sends out messages that need to be pondered upon. The use of humour makes the spectators take a refreshing perspective on the drama that is written with the elements of wit and insinuations. The play is set in rural Texas and the characters are either devout of finding their faith through trial and error. Margery is newly widowed and has a teenage son Jason. Pastor Greg asks her to start a puppet club to make children believe in The Bible and keep them safe from the clutches of the devil. What unfolds is a hysterical take on organized religion and exposes the hypocrisy that is believed and lived.

Askins builds his play around faith with lively characters and assembles them together to create hilarity. As the play talks about the farce of religion it can be said that "indeed, in the case of *Hand to God*, laughter may also be the consequence of strong feelings and deep emotional unease. It is comic relief in the midst of tragedy, or, in this case, dark comedy, offloading, releasing the tensions of ultraviolence. It is the laughter that might seem out of place when it

comes as an answer to shock, the laughter of the spectators of Fargo, the dark comedy crime film written by Joel and Ethan Cohen." (Drugeon, 2019, p.7). Also, it "takes the audience by the scruff of the neck and shakes it until it gets the message." (Sierz, 2001, p.4). And exactly what messages are those? The answer is that Askins believes that believing in religion and the customs and rituals that come with it are nothing but farce and that religion itself is a joke, a comedy. The belief of Margery that her son Jason's puppet Tyrone is possessed by the devil and needs an exorcism, without thinking rationally, is evidence enough that to what extent has religion brainwashed people into believing in ritualistic acts. That very belief evokes humour in the play.

Furthermore, Askins has taken a great risk of courting controversy by writing the play because it could turn into "a show that is going to divide people right down the Middle" (Shenton, 2016). Fortunately, that did not happen and the play became a success for what it was meant to be, a comedy. Also, the playwright has dealt with the suppression of emotions of love, attraction and sex through Pastor Greg and the troublemaker teenager Timothy. Both of them are attracted to Margery and make their feelings known to her. All this takes place in holy premises and while studying The Bible that preaches and lays emphasis on chastity and self-control. The humour in the play cannot be underlined in a better manner than that. The presence of the teenagers in the play, Jason, Timothy and Jessica and their interactions with their puppets have a deep meanings that the dramatist wants to convey.

Therefore, those meanings can be decoded as – "The lead character, Timothy, channels all of his anger, fury, and disdain for the outside world through his puppet, Tyrone. The targets of the puppet's vitriol include family members and bullies, but most prominently, religion. Jessica, another character, has a female puppet that takes on the social taboo of highly graphic sex. These puppets fully embody their handlers' ids, and these three-dimensional, articulated objects allow for more expressiveness and functionality than any mask could ever achieve." (Thomas, 2015, p.57). The playwright has brought to the fore the mismatch between the scriptural rules of behaviour and the natural, innate tendencies of the humans. The suppression of those natural feelings and thoughts is not possible according to Askins. The sexual intercourse between Margery and Timothy, that too a violent one, is a testimony that humans don't get overpowered by basic instincts, it is a part of them. The humour in this incident is on organized religion and on the teachings of restraint.

The essence of humour in Hand to God is in the illogical thinking of people when it comes to religion. The characters are confused and are bereft of thinking clear. They are torn inside between what they are supposed to do – a societal pressure – and what they want, the choice of freedom. Additionally, the foul language in the play points to the moral degradation that exists despite moral values being in place through religion. The dialogues of Jason's puppet Tyrone and the manner in which he incites Jason to become violent are not at all comical in the beginning but as the play nears its end, all the mayhem can be fathomed and the foolishness and cunning of mankind comes to light. And that is through the belief in the devil. The convenience with which the mental sickness and twistedness of a human is blamed on the devil so that they can escape blame and punishment is the easiest excuse to commit more evil and stay blameless. The hilarious part is that the devil is the creation of religion, and therefore, religion itself offers an escape route to people. If that is not funny, nothing is.

Home, I'm Darling

Laura Wade has used satirical wit to the hilt in this play and has explored the comedy that presents itself when two eras clash with each other. The situational irony that rears its head time and again and the hilarious dialogues make this play a comedy which is quite different from the others as it is devoid of any traditional ways of comedy. The protagonist Judy is fixated with the 1950's and has devoted herself to live in a house that resembles the decade of the fifties and has turned herself into an individual of the fifties – by behaving, dressing and conducting her daily life like that in the bygone era. The audiences are amused at this situation where Judy has turned back time and living a life that is unique. Her husband Johnny doesn't object to his wife's lifestyle and becomes a willing partner to it. This highlights the relationship equation between the couple which has a loving understanding at its core.

However, things take an unexpected turn when the couple runs into financial difficulties. Laura Wade has used themes of feminism, gender roles, nostalgia and domesticity, and the funny side of it to engage the audiences. Additionally, she has explored the themes of finding happiness and the past and the present. Also "this show mines the dark comedy in this kind of scenario for all it's worth." (Hauk, 2023, para.17). Primarily, Judy behaves in the manner she does is because she believes that by doing so, it will bring bliss to her marriage. Her thinking stems from the American way of life in the fifties where a woman used to be a homemaker while the husband used to be the sole breadwinner of the family. Although there is nothing wrong in that way of thinking, Judy fails to realize that times have changed and that the economy of the 50's doesn't exist anymore.

Laura Wade has used ordinary day to day incidents to make the play hilarious. In Act One, Judy refuses to have sex with Johnny because that would mess up the neatness of their picture perfect living room. In Act Two, the spectators are shocked to witness the well-mannered Judy hurl abuses. This change in her character adds to the intrigue of the play. It evokes laughter and at the same time, denotes a shift in the relationship between Judy and Johnny. Sylvia, Judy's mom, tells Judy that her idea of the life in the fifties wasn't the way she thinks because she had lived in that era and it was not all happiness as Judy thinks it to be. Ignoring her mother she says "that this life is her choice, and that she is a feminist because feminism involves women being able to choose whatever they want." (McKeown, 2019, para. 12).

Laura Wade depicts the misery creeping into their happy married life in a slow manner. And by doing so, the spectators are able to witness the changes that take place in Judy's behaviour which causes great amusement. By the

time the play makes its way to Act Three, the reality sets on Judy and she realizes that it is not reasonable to live the life of the fifties in the present day. The playwright treats the audiences to a roller-coaster ride of the ongoings in Judy's consciousness. Wade wants the audiences to know the difference between imagination and reality and she believes the best way to do it is by "learning about truth through fiction," (Mountford, 2019, para. 18). *Home, I'm Darling* is referred to by some critics as a dark comedy but some others argue that the light-hearted manner in which the script is depicted, it is "a clever social comedy that tackles a lot of cultural issues and the writer has a wry eye with a lot of witty lines and social commentary." (Home, I'm Darling Review, 2023).

CONCLUSION

This paper carried out a to the point examination of the use of humour in plays to overlook the dark realities of life. The researcher noted that to approach a subject that is under consideration is intricate and complex because many themes are interwoven into the plays by the playwrights. As a result, humour cannot be distinguished into parts but rather is to be considered as a whole in all the situations depicted. The perspective matters. The three playwrights – Laura Wade, Patrick Barlow and Robert Askins have scripted plays that are funny and yet deliver messages. They take the audiences to worlds that are unique and help them explore to situations that make them feel happy through their light-hearted plays. To elicit humour and to make the audiences react to it is a tough ask. The three playwrights have excelled in their endeavours and trailblazed their way to take humour to greater heights by finding, or rather, pointing to the humour that is around us in all contexts.

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