

Thoughts on Corpsing



Americans simply do not have a satisfactory term for what we British call Corpsing. It's a slang word born out of giggling on stage and some claim that it derives originally from Actors trying to make other Actors *playing* corpses laugh. Of course American Actors corpse but when they do it I think they just call it... laughing.

The corpse origins remind me of a drama school production of *Mother Courage and her Children*. The Actress playing Swiss Cheese was rehearsing a particular scene. Her character had died and was being carried on, in a bag, over the shoulder of a Soldier. She was a corpse and in her mind she thought, 'I hope I don't corpse... because then I'll be a corpsing corpse!' Of course this is exactly what happened; her body (in the bag) shook and quavered, only for the Director to yell 'STOP IT!' in a very loud and protracted manner. To no avail though, for once you've gone, you've gone.

Corpsing is a subject that, at times, divides opinion. Kelsey Grammer said that he doesn't know an Actor who 'hasn't turned up stage and shook with laughter at some time or another.' Dame Judi Dench is a famous corpser. Yet what Actor hasn't known a Director or fellow cast member that has not concurred with the (I think) consensus that corpsing is a given. It will happen.

How can this happen though when we are so concentrated on a scene? Perhaps it's *because* we are so concentrated. The cliché is that laughter is a stress release. Our body reacting to a strained situation, our epiglottis constricts the

larynx and we are laughing. It's no secret really that laughter is a coping mechanism. If one becomes stressed, angry, or upset we will (if we're lucky) laugh and thus release said stress and the entire pent up psychic tension that strong emotion creates.

There's more to laughter than that though. Those that study Gelotology (study of laughter), say that when we laugh the lining of inner blood vessels dilate and thus increase blood flow. A health benefit. Also, Medical professionals do say that in biochemistry laughter does reduce stress, as in the stress hormones, cortisol. The brain itself releases endorphins, which we know can relieve pain. Laughter also releases anti bodies that build the immune system.

No matter how many health benefits Biochemists or Psychologists prove... some Directors will always look on at the corpsing Actor with all the anger and rage that God used when witnessing Adam and Eve munch on those damned Apples. However, however strict and disciplined you are with yourself, circumstances out of your control will nail even the most focused of Actors. I consider myself pretty good at keeping it together when others flail... Yet I am not immune. I was on stage in France once, mid scene and mid sentence, mid word... when I suddenly coughed up (apologies) an ancient, almost sentient like mucus lump from the deepest depths of my tattered, asthma ridden lungs. Said creature flew up in the air and then nicely down, plop, onto the middle of the stage.

The Actress opposite me was supposed to be playing the scene in a japey, light and fluffy manner. Her facial expression now however was one of incomprehensible disgust. I, to coin a phrase, pissed myself laughing. Well, you'd have to be dead not to.

The fear is that audiences won't forgive you for breaking the world of the play. This is blatantly not true. Audiences like it, in moderation. It wakes them up, sends a little electric jolt through the Theatre. Also there really is a perverse thrill, with a hint of schadenfreude, of seeing that gap between Actor and Character. Don't fear the corpse, fear the recovery. To fight a corpse is to make it worse. So let it happen, quickly if you can, and then resume. If a corpse continues however, or repeats, audience patience and common enjoyment will soon turn to exasperation.

There's an Actress I know that, during a long three month tour, never corpsed. Never ever. Until the last act of the last performance of the tour. She, playing my Mother, was fighting with another Actress (playing my girlfriend). They were stood over me, my character being unconscious on the floor. Nothing happened. No trigger, but my "Mother" starting uncontrollably laughing. The hysterics came out of no where. The other Actress went too and the two of them had to sidle off stage, trying to argue and be cross with each other while blatantly laughing. My character then had to miraculously wake up and improvise several lines of dialogue in a vain attempt to keep the narrative of the play going.

Later the Actress said simply... 'I just suddenly thought, what are we doing here? In a play? Pretending and fighting... and I went.' You can't condemn a corpser. It's an inevitability. It will happen, at some point, to all of us. All one can strive for is to corpse in moderation and with some economy.