

32nd International Society for Humor Studies Conference (2022)

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Letter to Editor

Ricevuto il 7 luglio 2022; accettato il 9 luglio 2022

The last time I was convenor of the annual conference for the International Society of Humor Studies, was exactly twenty years ago in 2002. Do not ask me why, but in 2020, I daringly set out to repeat the experience. Daringly because in 2002 the event had been incredibly successful which meant I had to live up to a great deal. With over 250 delegates from all five continents and Nobel prize-winner Dario Fo as a guest speaker my levels of anxiety at having another go should be quite understandable. But the daring had gone up a notch by 2022 after this planet had undergone two years of events that may well have changed the old world as we knew it in 2002 forever. Older, but not wiser, after having to postpone the conference twice owing to Covid-19 restrictions plus a military conflict unravelling too close for comfort, I surrendered to the persuasive flow of the Society's Executive Board and went ahead with the recklessness of a bull in a china shop, with what I have labelled the Calamity Edition of the event. From June 29th to July 3rd 2022, the 32nd incarnation of the ISHS Annual Conference took place, live, with delegates present in person. The Centro Residenziale Universitario located above the tiny hamlet of Bertinoro, a 10th century mediaeval military fortress, strategically positioned to overlook the surrounding plains below, once again hosted the conference.

Against all odds, just over a hundred humour scholars took the risk of coming to Italy at a moment in which Europe was experiencing an umpteenth wave of the pandemic. It was especially wonderful to see that eleven delegates from 2002 were among those who had the guts to travel and take part in a traditional inperson conference. The symbol of this conference was Pulcinella, the Neapolitan mask and ancestor of Punch. Pulcinella is the Italian trickster par excellence. He wears a mask that covers his eyes and nose, a distant nod to Covid and my insisting that FFP2 masks be firmly in place indoors throughout the event. OK so a very few coughing no-maskers disobeyed, but I refused point blank to do a hybrid conference because the getting to know people and general networking is every bit as important as listening to people delivering their papers. As all of us know, talking to people on the other side of a screen can be alienating and few academics have the communicative skills of Tik-Tokers. I stood my ground and only allowed the AI group of delegates (my label) who knew exactly how to govern a virtual platform in order to perform in remote – thanks Kiki Hempelmann. More importantly, those 11 established scholars who had come to Bertinoro for the second time had in the meantime generated over a score of newbies to the discipline. This is a great achievement for the future of Humour Studies.

If Covid and a war on the doorstep were not enough, the Conference took place in the hottest week in Italy in recorded history. It was sweltering with temperatures in the high thirties in the shade.

Furthermore, trains and planes were severely disrupted for numerous reasons and, as I write, several delegates are still awaiting their luggage. So off we went with the opening ceremony. Twenty years ago, the Mayor of Bertinoro, Ariana Bocchini, had opened the conference. Twenty years on, her daughter, Jessica Allegni, the present Mayor of Bertinoro, did the same. Recordings of Victor Raskin and of founding member of the Society Don Nilsen greeting the audience preceded the Presidential Address delivered by Sharon Lockyer. Sharon tackled the theme of the conference head-on by that focusing on the seriousness of humour and its pervasiveness in the current public sphere. Each of the four invited speakers treated the seriousness of funniness differently. Conal Condren discussed the treatment of laughter as an expression of humour across history; Don Kulick, investigated the way two TV series dealing with people on the autism spectrum, invite different kinds of laughter. Cartoonist Martin Rowson presented over 100 of his political cartoons that each made a serious point in the true tradition of Hogarth & Gillray. Tony Veale, who had been stuck for several hours on a (German) train, arrived so late that he had to give his lecture on some of the ways in which a machine can leverage its sense of the “funny peculiar” to foster a sense of “funny ha-ha” in human audiences, the following day.

There were 26 panels, ranging from traditional subjects like humour theory, humour styles, comic stereotypes, humour and gender, humour across borders and in translation to humour in education and humour in architecture. There were also numerous new themes such as humour in neurodiversity, humour recognition and humour and Artificial Intelligence. Offensive humour, humour within political concerns, wokeness, polarisation, and, of course, Covid were the object of several panels. Numerous panels focussed on philosophy while humour and the law was another newish entry to the discipline. Giseline Kuipers who had won the very first Emerging Scholar award back in the day, brought with her many new scholars who presented in the four panels that she chaired on Humour in the Public Sphere. Salvatore Attardo, twenty years previously, had delighted in my confusing interpretation of Fo’s performance: with no prior briefing I acted as interpreter and had to translate Fo speaking in gramelet, a made-up anti-language, which led me to produce a promiscuous mix of Italian and English. Sal was awarded the Lifetime Achievement Prize remotely because he had grand-parenting duties to fulfil in Texas. There were tears in both Texas and Bertinoro. Three prominent humour scholars who were present in 2002 are no longer with us. They are Bill Fry, Larry Ventis who we lost to Covid in early 2020, and Christie Davies. Back then we were honoured to listen to a frail and elderly Bill Fry, to Larry’s talk about how he cured patients with arachnophobia by dressing up huge hairy spiders in bright pink tutus, and last, but not least, to watch Christie behaving badly in every possible way as the prankster we all knew him to be. Christie’s widow, Janetta, presented Dick Zipp with the Christie Davies Award; Guillermo Castañar received the Don and Alleen Nilsen Young Scholar’s Award. The two Graduate Student Awards went to Nikita Lobanov and Aikaterini Zacharopolou. The gala dinner included the traditional joke telling competition hosted by Ian Brodie and out of tune singing provided by the well-known off-key female vocalists Chiaro and Kuipers. On the Saturday morning, a huge 8kg millefeuille with chantilly cream and red berries washed down with bubbly Pinot closed the event. The bus to the station left a couple of young Dutch scholars behind; luckily, the organisers were still around to save the day and we think they made it home safely. And it is precisely youngsters such as these two stranded delegates who will in the future become established scholars who may well host the event in Bertinoro for a third time in 2042.



Bionote

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Professor of English Language and Translation at the University of Bologna's Department of Interpreting and Translation. Since publishing *The Language of Jokes: Analysing Verbal Play* (Routledge 1992) she has written over 100 articles and book chapters on diverse aspects of language and humour, such as *Gender and Humor: Interdisciplinary and International Perspectives* (co-edited with Raffaella Baccolini, Routledge, New York: 2014) and *The Language of Jokes in the Digital Age* with Routledge in 2019. Her latest book *Comedy in Political Language: How Politicians Use Humour* will be coming out with Cambridge University Press in 2023. She has been invited to lecture on humour across Europe, Asia and New Zealand. Beyond academia, her hobbies include knitting, eating cheese, running, socialising and socialism.