WHAT MAKES EUROPE LAUGH?
Local Comedies for an International Market

Copenhagen, 6 December 2008

CONTENTS

Foreword
WHAT WE LAUGH ABOUT
by Marion Döring, director of the European Film Academy

Panel 1
HUMOUR LESSONS: The Cinematography of Laughter
Reza Bagher, director, screenwriter, Sweden
Bent Hamer, director, screenwriter, Norway
Anders Thomas Jensen, director, screenwriter, Denmark
Maciej Stuhr, actor, comedian, Poland

Panel 2
WHAT’S SO FUNNY? A Conversation between a British and a French Critic
Derek Malcolm, film critic (Evening Standard), UK
Jean Roy, film critic (L´Humanité), France

Panel 3
THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF LAUGHTER: Where Does Humour End?
Dani Levy, director, screenwriter, Germany
Omar Marzouk, actor, comedian, Denmark

Round Table
WHAT MAKES HUMOUR TRAVEL? Strategies for Successful Comedies
Adriana Chiesa di Palma, sales agent, Italy
Per Nielsen, producer, Denmark
Antonio Saura, producer, Spain
**What We Laugh About**

As part of the weekend programme for the 21st European Film Awards in Copenhagen, the EFA Conference 2008 was dedicated to film comedies. Is there a topography of humour, a shared European quality that unites us in laughter? In other words: Can film comedies be cross-culturally funny, humorous or witty? **WHAT MAKES EUROPE LAUGH?**

After an introduction by EFA's Deputy Chairman Nik Powell, a series of panel discussions, chaired by film journalist and scholar Eva Novrup Redvall and Jacob Neiiendam, director of the new festival CPH:PIX, looked at different cultural variations of humour and the way they are depicted and perceived in film.

**Humour Lessons: The Cinematography of Laughter** served as an introduction to different versions of humour and how well it travels in comedies. The panel brought together filmmakers who all have experience in bringing their films to other countries’ audiences. Screenwriter and director Reza Bagher (Sweden) is known across Europe for his comedy POPULAR MUSIC FROM VITTULA (2004), a film located in the area at the Swedish-Finnish border where cultures and languages meet and mix, and creating a humour that seemed impossible to translate.

The films by director, writer and producer Bent Hamer (Norway) are marked by his silent humour and have been distributed in more than 40 countries, having participated in over 80 film festivals around the world, and have received some 30 prizes and awards. Anders Thomas Jensen (Denmark), the award-winning director and screenwriter who invented the so-called Danish action-comedy with the box-office hit IN CHINA THEY EAT DOGS (1999), wrote the scripts for many of the Dogma films and received much critical acclaim for ADAM'S APPLES (2005) which he also directed. And actor and comedian Maciej Stuhr (Poland), co-host of the European Film Awards 2006 in Warsaw, is also founder of a highly successful cabaret ensemble.

What’s So Funny? is at first glance a simple question that was debated by two eminent film experts, Derek Malcolm from the UK and Jean Roy from France. Their discussion revealed just how funny the life of a critic can be...

The Unbearable Lightness of Laughter - Where Does Humour End? highlighted a delicate matter which has become a globally discussed conflict: Does humour end where religion begins? German director, actor, screenwriter and producer Dani Levy, whose latest film MEIN FÜHRER: THE TRULY TRUEST TRUTH ABOUT ADOLF HITLER (2007) has been enormously successful but also controversially discussed in regard to the ‘fun factor’ of dictatorship, talked with Danish stand-up comedian Omar Marzouk who seeks, as he once said, “to overcome the polarization between Islamic and Western societies with the help of humour”.

A final round-table session looked at strategies for internationally successful comedies, bringing together EFA Board members Adriana Chiesa di Palma (sales agent, Italy) and Antonio Saura (producer, Spain), as well as producer Per Nielsen from Denmark.

The EFA Conference 2008 was presented by the European Film Academy e.V. and EFA08 ApS with the support of The Danish Film Institute, FFA German Federal Film Board, MEDIA Desk Denmark, TNT Express, and United International Pictures (UIP) and I wish to thank everybody who has helped to make it possible. Tusen Tak!

Marion Döring, director of the European Film Academy
**Humour Lessons:**
The Cinematography of Laughter

with
- **Reza Bagher**, director, screenwriter, Sweden
- **Bent Hamer**, director, screenwriter, Norway
- **Anders Thomas Jensen**, director, screenwriter, Denmark
- **Maciej Stuhr**, actor, comedian, Poland

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**Eva Novrup Redvall:** I’d like to start by talking to you, Bent, because you’ve just come from Tokyo where you’ve shown *O’Horten*. The film was in Cannes and is also the Norwegian entry for the Oscars. What is your experience showing a film like *O’Horten* in Tokyo and in France? Do people laugh about the same things as your Norwegian home audience?

**Bent Hamer:** Well, I didn’t see the film together with a Japanese audience. I did press, like it is. You come to Japan; you work from morning to late evening. But I started to ask them questions about *O’Horten*. I asked [them] if *O’Horten* could have been a Japanese train driver and they laughed a lot about that and said, yes, they thought so.

So I thought a little bit about these questions I get all the time when travelling around - whether it is a specific Nordic humour. I mean, wherever you live, you are influenced by the place you come from. But you are also influenced by other things, there might be some melancholy - we’re from the melancholic vodka belt, as some journalist said, the Finns are maybe the darkest ones. It reminds me of a joke, it’s my wife’s favourite: how can you see that two Finns want to talk to each other? You have to follow carefully, because it’s when one of them moves his eyes from his own shoe tips to the other guy’s shoe tips - which is maybe the kind of understated, very low-key, melancholic humour which can be recognised as Nordic.

**ENR:** I just heard another one this morning, about Swedish Finns. How do you recognise a Swedish Finn? It’s a person who knows how to be silent in two languages. I think your films have this visual kind of humour more than a verbal humour. Do you think that makes them travel as well as they do?

**BH:** Not necessarily, I think you can do it through dialogue as well. I mean, you have to establish a character, however you do it. It’s visual, but it’s in a context all the time. And I think it’s a human kind of humour, it looks like people recognise it wherever [they are]. It surprised me, at least with the first couple of films. There is no recipe, but there is something about human beings, more that connects them than that separates them. It’s hard to show just a short clip from my films and say it’s funny because it isn’t. In a context it’s funny; you can recognise things, even if you’re not familiar with this period of time.

**ENR:** Anders, you are quite well known for writing witty dialogue. You have written a number of screenplays and you have directed *Flickering Lights* and *The Green Butchers* and *Adam’s Apples*. [...] Would you say that the humour in *Adam’s Apples* is based on the dialogues? What kind of humour has made this film so successful?

**Anders Thomas Jensen:** First of all, there are some themes that travel better than others. I mean, *Flickering Lights* is themed on the
family but there are so many hints to Danish literature and Danish culture so it didn't travel very well. And *The Green Butchers* didn't really have a theme, I mean it's about cannibalism and that didn't travel much either. (laughter) But *Adam's Apples* is a film about good and evil and that's a theme that travels. I don't think it's based on dialogue; much of it is the characters and the situations.

**ENR:** Some people would say there's dark humour and a special Danish irony at play. Do you think so as well or do you think that people have reacted the same way in other countries?

**ATJ:** I think humour is an individual thing. Of course you can say a lot of broad things about humour in different countries. But I think it's more a question of age, at least for the films I've done, comedies. You can see older generation versus younger generation. You can see that there's much more of a difference there than for instance between seeing it in Russia or in Spain.

**ENR:** Actually there was just a report carried out by the Danish Film Institute where they asked the audience what genre films they thought we were good at ... and drama; they didn't think we were very good at making comedies. So there's probably a generational difference there as well. What do you think, is there a generational aspect to humour?

**Reza Bagher:** I don't know, when I am writing the script or directing a scene I am not thinking about anyone but myself – if it makes me laugh it works for me. And I hope that there are some other people out there who have the same experience and the same sense of humour. It is very difficult to decide on the audience first and then make the movie or write the script – at least that's my experience. It's based only on myself.

**Maciej Stuhr:** I think the biggest question is: do we have something in common? Because it doesn't depend on how old you are. Do we have the same sense of humour? I think this is the most difficult thing in our discussion because you can know a foreign language very well but the sense of humour is the hardest thing to learn. You can know all the vocabulary, all the grammar and still not know if something is for fun or not. I was the host of the European Film Awards two years ago in Warsaw. Half of the audience was Polish and they knew me very well and they know when I say good evening in a funny way, it's funny. The evening was very nice because the rest of the audience quickly got the message, okay, this guy is funny and we can laugh, it's okay. Last year, in Berlin, I was presenting an award, I was on stage for just five minutes. I prepared a couple of jokes and the audience was like – still - because they didn't know that I was joking. So I think this is the main question, is something for fun or not. I have a lot of experience with live audiences, theatre and comedy, when you stand in front of people and you look into their eyes and they laugh or not – this is the big experience.

**ENR:** We were talking about Polish comedies this morning and we're not really watching that many Polish films in Denmark. You said, well, you're really missing out on some good Polish comedies.

**MS:** I can hardly imagine how to translate most Polish comedies because they are deeply rooted in Polish politics, Polish history. It is a problem when they don't talk about general things like love or hate, those topics.. I heard that you prepared [a clip from] one of my movies as well but actually it's not a comedy, it's a very tragic film. And when we showed this film at the festivals in Locarno and Berlin it was very surprising for us, the audience laughed a lot, they thought it was black humour.

**ENR:** Would you say that there is such a thing as Polish humour? Of course, there's the language barrier, but do you find that it has certain traits?

**MS:** I think irony is the key word for Polish humour, irony and distance. We want to see our own life from a
distance, from another point of view. And that makes us feel good, just to watch it.

**ENR:** There was a study about Danish TV satire where it’s said that it has changed from political to social satire. Reza, you have made a film about this no man’s land between Sweden and Finland, an adaptation of *Popular Music from Vittula*. What could you relate to in that story?

**Reza Bagher:** When I first read the book I found it very interesting. And very funny. Actually, the producer first asked me two years earlier and I told him that I didn’t have enough experience to make this film. So, two years later I was ready for it.

**ENR:** It’s very much a story about regional differences and this special part of the country. Have you experienced how people relate to this when the film travels?

**RB:** The first time I saw the film in Germany, they had dubbed it in German. It was amazing because in the original, they talk Swedish and Finnish and we don’t understand Finnish because it’s a completely different language. It’s not like Danish where I understand some words. But the audience laughed about it. I mean, they dubbed it in German and I don’t know if it is some kind of dialect or what but it works somehow, I don’t know why.

**ENR:** I would like to ask all of you – do you have any experiences with this? Because that is, of course, a problem with a lot of comedies travelling.

**RB:** We don’t like each other. *(laughter)*

**ATJ:** I think it’s always a bit scary to see your film with subtitles. Especially because you work a lot on the dialogue and trying to differentiate the characters and basically everything gets lost in the translation. So dialogue travels very poorly when translated. But sometimes you are amazed that it really works. You get a screener or you see the subtitles and you think, ‘Oh my God, everybody’s going to leave the cinema.’ You loose a lot of nuances, about 30 percent, I’d say. But I want to add something. The Swedish and the Danish understand each other and culturally we are very close and still we don’t see each other’s films – it’s pretty odd.

**RB:** We don’t like each other. *(laughter)*

**ATJ:** It used to be like that. Now we agreed that it’s the Norwegians we don’t like. *(more laughter)*

**RB:** I had a strange experience with my first film, it was a romantic comedy. And it was screened at the festival in Moscow. This comedy was actually based on language and in Moscow they had a translator. You got these headphones and had this monotonous voice in your head. I thought it doesn’t work, how can they laugh? As a director you put a lot of emotion into every character and then it is translated into a monotonous sound! But we won and I couldn’t understand how. It was a miracle! I think that dialogue has great difficulties travelling, for action it is much easier.
Q: We heard many interesting things about making humour travel. I’d be interested in the experiences you have made in your own countries. Have there ever been scenes in your films which you thought people would find funny but they didn’t?

ATJ: For me it is always [a matter of] trying to find a balance where only half of the cinema is laughing and the other half isn’t. I think that’s where it becomes really interesting. In Adam’s Apples for instance there is a handicapped child and we’re making fun of it and basically half of the audience will laugh about it and the other half won’t. Sometimes perhaps you go a bit too far but, erm... - oh, I don’t know where I’m going with this! (laughter) - but you don’t want to do it over again. I mean, you can do something where you know everybody will laugh but then it’s not really funny.

MS: It’s a very hard job to make people laugh. You never know if they will laugh.

ATJ: That’s what I wanted to say! (laughter)

MS: This is what makes us become old too fast because we are so worried whether they will laugh or not. I have this cabaret group and we do a lot of sketches. One of them was about Pope John Paul II. It was a parody and in my opinion it was very, very funny. But the Polish audience - you can hardly imagine what John Paul II means to them!

They didn’t know if they should pray or cry – but definitely not laugh. So we did it once! (laughter) In my opinion humour depends very much on the rhythm: if you say something at the appropriate moment, it’s funny; if you say it half a second later or earlier it’s not funny. So a lot of things during the making of a movie can blow the joke away. It was funny on set and it’s not funny on screen. It happens all the time. And the opposite as well, sometimes you do something and suddenly the audience laughs. And it’s wonderful because you never know.

Q: When you make these movies, do you start with the intention of making a comedy? Or do you just want to tell a story that then happens to be funny?

ATJ: I think it’s good to know where you are going. (laughter) I mean, basically you can tell the same story in a dramatic way or in a funny way. So, I always know, I mean, intentionally I try to know that it’s a comedy this time. Sometimes you have the story and you start out making a drama and then you discover it could also be a comedy. But in my experience it’s at a very early stage that you decide whether it’s a comedy or not.

RB: In my experience the producer doesn’t allow you to do anything else. If you get the money to do a comedy, you have to deliver a comedy.

Q: To what extent are you thinking of specific actors when you’re making your films? Do you normally write for specific actors?

ATJ: Yes, I do. And yes, you think about it and you try to use it, also if you use the same actors – which I did. Sometimes you build on what you did last time and sometimes you turn it around and play with the audience’s expectations. I mean, I use these actors because they’re good actors but I think it would be stupid not to be aware of this. Of course, when you travel, it’s a totally different thing because people don’t know them – well that’s not true, at festivals in Europe they think there are only five actors in Denmark!

Q: Does European comedy tend to address the cultural elite?

ATJ: The few comedies that travel definitely do. I think each country has its own comedies which aren’t looked at with much respect but are nevertheless seen by more people. The foreign European comedies that eventually do open in cinemas here are, well, they are also the best, I think, but there are - I don’t know what to call them without offending anyone (laughter) - but there are a lot of comedies that never travel.

Q: I would like to address the issue of gender. What does it mean for comedies?

MS: Well, I was studying psychology and I wrote a dissertation about humour. I focused not on artistic points but the other things that influence humour, for example the price of the ticket, the more you pay, the more you laugh. How big is the audience, I don’t mean the number of people but the percentage of empty seats. When it’s full, it’s always bigger fun. One of the topics was gender and my observation was that women usually smile from the beginning to the end, the level is constant, sometimes they smile more, or less. Men sit there solemnly and suddenly blow up in laughter. But it probably also depends on the culture because men and women are in a different position in England than in Poland or in Arabia.

ENR: So, to round it off, how can we get the audiences more interested in seeing comedies from other countries?

RB: Making a movie about Norwegians is good. (laughter) Actually, in my opinion it’s the characters that can travel. If you
look at the good comedies, all of them have in common that they are based on the characters. Sometimes you lose the emotion in the translation, it depends on who the translator is, it's very important.

**MS:** I think humour can also solve big international problems. For example Roberto Benigni in *La Vita e bella* which was a very funny film or *The Band's Visit*, which is one of my favourite films, about the Jewish-Arab problem, in a very lovely, funny way.

**ENR:** Have you ever been surprised by the way your films are being marketed in different countries? We've seen a Norwegian film, for instance, being marketed in Denmark by “Warning! This is a Norwegian comedy!” and you wonder if that really works.

**MS:** Well, in Poland, when we hear this is a German comedy, what that communicates is: don't bring your children! *(laughter)*

**Q:** Where do you find inspiration, what are your references?

**ATJ:** This is very non-European. I only saw American films growing up so it's Billy Wilder and Frank Capra and now it's the Coen brothers and people like that. I'm very sad, I would have loved to see more European films but I grew up in a small town so I didn't know there was any such thing as European film before I was twenty. *(laughter)* But I'm catching up on it now!

**RB:** Emir Kusturica, I like his movies very much. And the other reference is my wife. I tell her about a scene and if she doesn't laugh at all I know that it will work. *(laughter)* Because she never laughs, and she is very surprised when she sees my movies: 'how could you, you are so boring!' *(laughter)*

**BH:** I sometimes get these questions about lists of directors I love and so on. I can't do that, whatever inspires me, inspires me. In a way it has nothing to do with film. And I like that. Of course in the end you have to solve certain things according to the length of the film, the story, beginning and end.

**ENR:** Thank you very much.
What’s so Funny?
A Conversation between a British and a French Critic

with

Derek Malcolm, film critic (Evening Standard), UK
Jean Roy, film critic (L’Humanité), France

Eva Novrup Redvall: This second session is with two very well respected film critics, Derek Malcolm and Jean Roy. I would like to start out by asking you: Have you seen a difference over the years in what makes Europe laugh?

Derek Malcolm: Well, you know, I’m at a great disadvantage here because the French are much better educated than the British, and they are also much more intellectual. So I’m going to tell you that actually what’s made me laugh most are not so much the comedies I see but some of the things that have happened to me as a critic. And I’ll just tell you one thing which is quite funny. In Venice, I had to interview John Ford, the great John Ford. For some reason he hated critics, he loathed critics and I was a little bit worried. I have no idea how I got the interview, he was there as an old man and he was having a retrospective at the Venice festival. Anyway, I went to the Excelsior Hotel and his wife opened the door and said, “Look, I’m terribly sorry but I’m afraid Jack” – because he was known as Jack – “has the most terrible stomach upset and I don’t think he’ll be able to give you an interview this morning.” And I said, “Well, that’s alright” – I was a little bit nervous and I thought I’ll go away. And just as I was turning to go away there was a voice, a great stentorian voice coming from the general direction of the lavatory saying “Come on in, I can deal with two shits at once!” (laughter) Well, that’s better than most comedies, isn’t it? I don’t think critics laugh very much at comedies, we sit there trying not to fall asleep, thinking, “Oh it’s too bloody long!” We’re not a very good audience really, do you think we are?

Jean Roy: Of course not. Critics are famous as the guys who think that the audience is not always right. But first of all: of course I am too young to have interviewed John Ford – as opposed to you! (laughter)

DM: Well, you’re French...

JR: But if you want a very personal joke about film critics and the image people have of film critics: in my place in Paris I go to the bar downstairs to buy cigarettes and there was this British couple, very lower class, like packing sausages in a chain factory in a Ken Loach film. They were on their honey-moon, first time in Paris. Of course, they didn’t speak a word of French; they were looking for a cheap hotel and asked the barman who didn’t understand. So, I was trying to be polite and help. “What do you do?” “Well, I work in a sausage factory” and so on. After ten minutes they asked me what I was doing and I was very afraid to answer that question, blushing and trembling. I said, “I’m a film critic.” “Ah, a film critic! We are in Paris! This could never happen in England, they are so snobbish, they are intellectuals, a different type of people.” I said, “But what do you read?” “Oh, in our family, we are lower class, leftist tradition, we read The Guardian.” “Oh yes, you have a critic at the Guardian, his name is Derek Malcolm, I tell you, he is not snobbish.” I picked up my cell phone and called Derek, “Derek, do you want to talk to your readers?” (laughter) But you see, the bad image the general audience has of Derek, they think of you as a piece of shit, like John Ford.

DM: Oh, I should have never told that story!

JR: But I like it a lot, it made me laugh!

DM: What I think about comedy is that the person on the screen has to be funny of himself or herself. And if they are funny people they can tell jokes that are not very good and you roar with laughter. There are others who can tell a very good joke and nobody laughs. It’s a question of the funny nature of the person much more than of a terrific script or anything. There was a chap called Tommy Cooper who made the most dreadful jokes but everybody roared with laughter because he was a very funny man. I think a lot of directors don’t understand that there maybe a script with a lot of awfully good jokes but if the person telling them isn’t funny it doesn’t work. The funniness is something about the person that makes you want to laugh, something about the face, something about the movement. The modern American comedies are so bloody awful, they tell nothing but lavatory jokes and penis jokes and God knows what and it’s just not funny. But when you get to
somebody like Laurel and Hardy, they just need to do a double take and you’re laughing. I remember when I was about eight I went to the theatre in London to see them on the stage. Of course, in those days they were not at all fashionable, the theatre was half-empty and I went to see my idols – Laurel and Hardy. And I said to my mother, “Can you ask the manager of the theatre whether I can see them after the show?” and I expected nothing to happen. But she asked the manager and he came up after the show and said, “Laurel and Hardy will see you now.” (laughter) I thought, “My God, how wonderful!” and I knocked on their dressing room door and they were absolutely marvellous. They asked, “You would like a nice cup of tea and a bun, wouldn’t you?” and I said, “Yes, yes, I would.” So they brought in some buns and one of the buns fell onto the chair and Hardy, who is the big fat one, sat on it. It was completely squashed flat. And he said, “There you are, my son.” (laughter) It was so funny! And they were so sweet, they talked to me for at least half an hour. And that was the greatest moment of my critical career, I might tell you.

ENR: Do you think critics have a prejudice against comedies?

JR: First I must say that I’m much too young to have seen Laurel and Hardy on stage. (laughter) But to answer your question: Somehow tragedy has always been considered as important and comedy as low-key. I don’t know why, in the history of legitimate theatre, as you call it in English, Shakespeare comedies are part of tragedies and tragedies have pieces of comedy and they are well appreciated too. And in France, we have Molière, who is basically comedy, and has been appreciated, also Racine and Corneille. But if we go to our days, how many comedies have won prizes in Cannes, Venice or Berlin? Because you’re laughing, suddenly you are considered as not serious. Let’s look at Hitchcock. Hitchcock has a wonderful British sense of humour and he has never won a prize for a film. And with Hitchcock I would like to answer a question from this morning: Do comedies still work in all fields? There was one thing which wasn’t answered this morning which concerns pieces of comedy referring to something younger people don’t understand. For example, when Hitchcock was shooting Marnie, casting Sean Connery was fun because he was James Bond and all the girls liked that. I mean, it was not so simple between Sean Connery and Tippi Hedren. And now, when you show Marnie to younger kids, they don’t laugh about it, they know Sean Connery but they don’t react to this, let’s say miscasting, obviously made on purpose. But if we go back to the history of comedy which we are supposed to talk about as older people, this I realise. (laughter) I must say that the British are pissed off with the French for one reason, namely that the greatest comedian in the history of cinema was French, it was Max Linder. He was so famous that when an unknown British comedian named Charlie Chaplin tried to build up his character he had to use the uniform of Max Linder and his way of playing and so on. And afterwards he realised that Max Linder was much better than he was and he had to change everything. And after that the bloody Americans stole both Linder and Chaplin. Chaplin was more successful, of course. But you let your best comedian go!

Still, I have to say that I admire British comedies, the Ealing comedies, or films like Whiskey Galore! or The Man in the White Suit, Monty Python, and so on, I think you have a great tradition in comedy. In France, I’m not so sure. We have a couple of local masters like Jacques Tati, of course, but if you look at the popular comedies from the 60s until the 80s the French comedies are really very bad.

DM: I don’t know what happens at festivals but occasionally they put on a comedy just to relieve everybody after seeing a lot of rather grey art films. And you know juries just don’t give them prizes. “Oh, it’s only comedy!” - I have heard this said over and over again. But comedy is much more difficult to do than drama, it’s really difficult and I can’t believe that these juries just slough them off, they just don’t consider them as material for prizes at festivals and that’s a terrible scandal. And it’s not surprising that a lot of people who are trying to make small independent films which they hope will succeed on the
festival circuit don't really make comedies. By the way, has anyone seen a German comedy? (laughter)

**JR:** There was a good tradition in German comedy but a lot of the directors who could have made them, like Ernst Lubitsch, Billy Wilder, went to America. They were Jewish, they were leftist, they had to leave. Basically that could be a reason for a certain absence of German comedies. But if you look at someone like Karl Valentin, for me he is one of the most successful comedians of all times. Of course, he was most successful on stage and his films are routines of what he did on stage. But the same goes for the Marx Brothers. And the example of the Marx Brothers is also important to mention in connection to something that was said this morning. In the Marx Brothers movies you have a lot of jokes playing with language, impossible to translate, impossible to subtitle – and still, the Marx Brothers have been famous all over the world. So I don't think this is an obstacle for comedies travelling from one country to another. I think that bad comedy doesn’t travel. I’ve seen some German comedy in Munich, mountain climbing and so on, and they’re not so funny, I must say. Maybe I’m elitist because I’m a film critic. But good comedies travel - and we give them good reviews. Juries don’t give them prizes but we give them good reviews. It’s not only the punch lines. I’m not going to bother you with jokes from French comedies.

**DM:** The only thing is that certain comedians go in and out of fashion. I can remember when I was young everybody used to pile in to see the Marx Brothers. And you couldn’t hear the dialogue for the laughter. Now I don’t think too many people go to see the Marx Brothers. They seem to have gone out of fashion.

**JR:** If you want to go back to European cinema, to Italian comedies, from the 60s mostly, Dino Risi, Ettore Scola, and so on, doing their best films in the 60s and early 70s maybe, they have been popular everywhere. Films were travelling at that time, even in small villages, I guess including Norway, you could see them and they were popular because they were dealing with things people could understand. But maybe comedy is not fashionable in these days like Western or musicals - that could be possible because we don’t see as many comedies as we used to.

**DM:** Usually in Cannes they are terribly bad in putting comedies on but that’s largely because there isn’t anybody in Cannes with a sense of humour anymore. (laughter) Nobody in our times is cracking one-liners like that. You know, when Jean Cocteau was president of the jury in Cannes at the end a producer said, “Oh, but look, the audience loved it.” And Jean Cocteau said, “Audience? Oh, but she’s the only one.” The most famous review in the history of French cinema is just one line: “A friend of mine suggested I should see this movie. A friend of mine?” End of review.

**JR:** But also, you didn’t have TV. But you had all these radio dramas, no images but great dialogue, it was the great time of the punch line and of all these one-liners. I don’t want to look as old as you are, (laughter) but for me it also has to do with TV where you don’t have this sense for punch lines. I’m not going to bother you with jokes from French comedies.

**DM:** Well, the worst thing that can happen to a critic is when the film maker comes up to you directly after the movie and asks you what you thought of it. That’s terrible. And there was an old English critic called Elizabeth who had the perfect answer. She used to say: “You’ve done it again!”

**DM:** But Sacha Guitry went to a dinner in his honour and at the end the hostess asked him, “Did you have a nice evening?” And the answer was: “Oh, I’ve had a very nice evening. But it wasn’t tonight.” (laughter) Nobody in our times is cracking one-liners like that.

You know, when Jean Cocteau was president of the jury in Cannes at the end a producer said, “Oh, but look, the audience loved it.” And Jean Cocteau said, “Audience? Oh, but she’s the only one.” The most famous review in the history of French cinema is just one line: “A friend of mine suggested I should see this movie. A friend of mine?” End of review.

**DM:** I’ve seen very serious films which I thought were very funny. I haven’t seen many funny films, no. I mean, the days of Monty Python are now over. But Monty Python carried all over the world, didn’t they? They managed to break through and that was very English humour. My theory is that the more French or British
the humour is, the more international it is. It’s a terrible mistake trying to make transatlantic things, trying to appeal to everybody. If you have a really good British comedy like the Ealing comedies, they do travel. Like Jacques Tati and Max Linder and people like that – they do travel but they were absolutely French. So I think that national humour can actually be very, very successful. I’m not sure about Germany, mind you, (laughter) but in Russia, yes, in India. I just wish people would stick to their own culture in making their films because it’s more likely to be funny than when they desperately try to make it international. Do you agree, Jean?

JR: It’s going to be boring but I will agree with you. There is a mistake somewhere but I will agree with you for now. Maybe we don’t have so many good comedies nowadays because some people don’t have a sense for the tragic. A comedy has to be a tragedy. When Charlie Chaplin eats spaghetti with his shoes, it’s the most horrible and tragic situation. You turn it into a comedy. The Italian comedies come from a time when there is unemployment and so on. And some of the best comedies were made in war times. And somehow in our days either the times are good but we just don’t notice (laughter) or the times are bad and we think it can’t be a source for comedy.

DM: You’re right. Of course!

JR: Oh dear! But I must say, since you’ve mentioned Indian comedies, I saw comedies in India and I laughed exactly at the same moments as the audience. But that’s also because in India you have as many languages as in Europe. So in India they have to create jokes in a way that if the film is in Hindi when it’s shown in a city where they speak Bengali people will understand. So I’ve never been lost or felt I’m not part of it.

DM: Some very funny things have happened to me in India, India is a funny place. They used to put the delegates up in the most god-awful, government-run hotel called the Ashoka in Delhi - just dreadful. And I got into the lift with somebody I vaguely recognised and I assumed he was a delegate and I just sort of said in passing, “Isn’t this a bloody awful hotel?” And he said to me, with a beatific smile, “We were put on this earth to suffer.” And I realised who it was - it was the Dalai Lama! (laughter)

Eva: We only have five minutes left, so...

JR: So, we should be serious?

Eva: No, but maybe there are some questions from the audience?

Q: Were people like Jacques Tati taken seriously and popular at the time?

DM: Well, I think they were, weren’t they?

JR: Yes.

DM: Sometimes not, critics are always five years behind the public - in that sense. Or they are five years ahead. There are a lot of great comedies where at the time the critics didn’t think much of them. I’m talking about British critics. And now they adore them, of course. But at the time we rather sloughed off the Monty Python saying, “Oh, it’s just Monty Python fooling about again.” And now we understand that they were great.

I mean, damn it, Laurel and Hardy were thought very basic at one time! Oh, no, not Laurel and Hardy - for goodness sake, not at all sophisticated! My daughter had never heard of Laurel and Hardy, and I said, “Look I’m going to put you in front of this TV set and I’m going to show you some shorts of Laurel and Hardy and if you don’t laugh, I’ll bloody well kill you.” (laughter) Actually, she did laugh. But I think a lot of young people don’t know about Jacques Tati, and certainly not about Max Linder or any of the old stars. They know nothing. Because they’re watching nothing but Hollywood movies. I met a commissioning editor for an arts paper recently who had never heard of Robert Mitchum. (laughter) Isn’t that unbelievable? And I was at the BBC World Service when Greta Garbo died and the young producer said, “Do you think it’s worth doing an obit?” (laughter) I mean, the ignorance! The ignorance of cinema’s history – and it’s only a hundred years old, for God’s sake! I can remember writing a little book about my 100 favourite films, not the best films but the ones that had affected me as a critic. And I got reviews saying, oh, he’s just trying to say how clever he is because he’s mentioning a Cuban film or a Chinese film none of us have seen and he’s just trying to show off. I mean the ignorance is awful! And the ignorance of most critics is not much better, there are a lot of very bad critics. There are very few good critics that know about cinema’s history, that know about the directors.

JR: François Truffaut used to say: “Each person has two jobs, his own and being a film critic.” (laughter) Everybody has an opinion on cinema, a definite opinion.
The Unbearable Lightness of Laughter: Where Does Humour End?

with

Dani Levy, director, screenwriter, Germany
Omar Marzouk, actor, comedian, Denmark

Jakob Neiendam: We’re going to talk about the unbearable lightness of laughter. So, are there things you cannot joke about, Dani?

Dani Levy: Absolutely.

JN: Like?

DL: Critics. (laughter) No, I would say there is no morality which doesn’t allow jokes about anything. I mean, you can even make jokes about holocaust victims. But you’re probably a lonely cowboy then. And I would not support it. But my opinion about jokes is: go as far as you can and then you will earn what you’ve spread out which is always a risk. What I realised with my movies is this: there was one comedy, Alles auf Zucker, which was very successful all over, it was some kind of a consensus comedy, which was nice and people loved it - but everybody loved it. And then I made My Führer which was very controversial and much less of a success although it sold much further world-wide. But I realised that my heart was beating more for My Führer just because I was risking more. And maybe comedies are sometimes therapy, as much for the filmmaker as for the audience. I loved the joke Derek was telling about the Dalai Lama because I would also say that a lot of life is suffering and suffering is also comedy.

Omar Marzouk: I would agree. Woody Allen said comedy is tragedy plus time and I think that’s true. I don’t think there is a subject that you cannot joke about. But having insight of the subject you’re joking about or making fun of is also very important so it’s not just making fun of the typical stereotypes. If you actually bring something new to the stage, you can take up quite controversial stuff.

OM: Has there actually ever been a comedy about the Mohammed cartoons? I mean, if there is a person in the world who knows, it’s probably you. What a world-wide event, what a no-go for humour! It has been provoking me for years to make a comedy about it but people, especially my wife, are telling me not to.

JN: But I think that’s a very good point, you need to know what you’re making fun of otherwise it’s not funny. And that was the big problem of the drawings. They didn’t know anything about what they were doing.

OM: Well, I think making fun of religions is actually very important but I don’t think that the cartoons really nailed it because I think the problem was that it had a manifest with it which was weird to accept for mainstream Muslims. I think the problem is that real life now is much funnier than anything that writers or any creative people can come up with.

JN: You mean absurd?

OM: Absurd, yes. I mean, do you make fun of religions, or of the people who interpret religion in a certain way, or the politicians who make weird laws? That’s the tough part.

JN: You are definitely someone who is not afraid of religious humour. Do you think religion is funny in itself?
with jokes. At least that might help the overcoming of experiences. It’s a way of dealing with it instead of just ignoring it. My parents both experienced the Third Reich and at home we made fun about everything - but not about that. For me it was very important to make fun of a taboo instead of just making fun of what everybody laughs about. That’s not really interesting for me and it doesn’t really help. I think society is always ready to laugh and I partly disagree with the two very charming critics that we heard before. There is modern laughing and a new time of comedy began after Tati and all the great masters that they mentioned. I think there is definitely a new approach to humour and a much riskier approach to humour, and the trashy comedies that might well be all penis-fixated and whatever also try to penetrate sexuality in a very modern way. I’m not always laughing but at least I see the attempt to bring in a certain kind of enlightenment or awareness to taboo themes. What I realised with this movie [My Führer], more than with any other comedy, is that humour is also a very personal thing, everybody has their own humour as they have their own taste. And not every comedy works for everybody. Sometimes you make a comedy that may work for ten or twenty percent of the people. But it might be important for them to have their comedy instead of the other eighty percent who maybe don’t find the comedy in it. And with this movie I realised that it was really different from projection to projection, there were some crowds, in some countries, where people just didn’t laugh, they didn’t get it or they didn’t want to get it. For them the humour was totally displaced. They didn’t like it. They didn’t want to laugh about Nazis, they didn’t want to laugh about the whole situation with Hitler. And there were other crowds in other countries where people were laughing constantly, the whole movie was taken as a comedy, as pure comedy, gag to gag. I was so astonished sometimes [to see] how different the effect on people could be and how personal it was. Even the discussions with audiences were so different from case to case that I realised there is objectively no comedy that works or doesn’t work.

JN: Has it changed your way of handling humour?

DL: It was a test for me to become more fearless, I’d say - not to fear not being loved. Every filmmaker is always in this trap where he wants to be loved but at the same time he wants to make something risky. That’s true for tragedies and comedies. As a filmmaker it is always a good experience to do your thing, to be happy with it. And I am very happy with this movie. I didn’t get all the love that I wanted but I survived it and it strengthened me.

JN: Omar, since we just talked about Jewish humour, is there such a thing as a distinct Muslim humour?

OM: A distinct Muslim humour? I’m not sure it’s very different from a lot of the Southern European humour, the Italian and French. The later Arabic humour is very Western, it’s always about politics and about how the government isn’t working. But
we don’t make fun of religion as much, that’s still a taboo. It’s coming on slowly.

**Question:** Do comedians who don’t have the cultural background even dare to take up issues like a specific religion?

**OM:** Some people do but they don’t really hit the point because they’re not embedded in the culture. And so a lot of the references and jokes become stereotypical and it’s usually not that funny. I do stand-up comedy and travel around the world and I’ve come to a point where I don’t have to write material anymore because things are so absurd.

**JN:** So you just comment on the present state?

**OM:** Right. I was doing a show in Tel Aviv and I was the first Muslim comedian ever to perform at the Camel Comedy Club. And I wanted to do jokes about Jews but I didn’t know where to start so I thought, I’m from Egypt, so I’ll do a joke about how it’s been going downhill for Jews ever since they left Egypt. And they should come back and we’ll build more pyramids. *(laughter)* I was so terrified before doing that joke because I didn’t know how they’d react. But they laughed so I thought I’ll give it another nudge. So I did a joke about how they should fight terrorism and employ us Muslims on the buses and trains wearing suicide belts because if a real suicide bomber comes along you can say, “I got this bus, go find your own bus.” *(laughter)* And they laughed about that, too! And then I did a joke about Jews having big noses. And that didn’t work out at all. And afterwards I thought it must be because they are so tired of the stereotype of all Jews having big noses. So I think it’s hard to hit a nail on the head if you don’t have insight into that religion, that culture.

**Question:** In November 530,000 people lost their job in the US and in Europe we’re moving from recession to depression. That’s not funny but how will it influence humour in film and television?

**OM:** Of course it’s not funny for the people who have just lost their job. But there will be a huge demand for comedy. I think comedy is a good vehicle to make sense of something that’s pointless, that you have no control over, and maybe you cannot understand. Comedy is going to be a fantastic way to address the situation with the whole world depression. I think it’s going to be a great time for comedy!

**DL:** Comedy always moves from one side to the other. One side is very tasteless, rude, brutal, ignorant, even stupid, making fun of a certain theme or subject or situation. On the other side I am identifying with characters, I’m full of love with them, I feel warmth and humorous empathy. Between these two poles comedy takes place.
Eva Novrup Redvall: We’ll be talking more about the business side now, and I know, Adriana, that you have a long experience of trying to make European films cross borders. Can you share some of these experiences with us?

Adriana Chiesa di Palma: Yes, what I’m going to say from my experience is probably going to be a summary of what has been discussed throughout the day. I’m an international distributor, I actually materialize the distribution and the diffusion of films in Europe and around the world. So, I am very committed to European cinema. Comedy is the most difficult genre to travel, and in consideration of what has been said I can summarise: it depends, of course, on the content - is it local, does it make references to the identity of the country, the social identity? Is it centred on one comedian because he is important and well-known? Does he speak very quickly? Is there a lot of dialogue? Because here we have to consider two things: there are countries where we dub – Italy, France, Germany and Spain. Then we have the other countries - where we subtitle. So there is a very serious language problem. Where we dub, of course, the situation is much easier. For instance, in Italy we have very good dubbing actors and it’s a great tradition. When humour is based mainly on the language, the dialect - the difference between dialects, between Roman, Milanese, Sicilian - will never come across. Even with dubbing it’s very difficult to find the right solutions. Of course, you can use different national dialects, but it is always difficult when humour is based on language. If you subtitle a film, 40 to 50 percent of the humour is lost. I can give you an example of a great Italian actor of the past, Alberto Sordi. His films are part of the history of Italian cinema, he made satires about our social life and national character. It was never possible to successfully distribute his films around the world because of his particular regional humour. This never came across with the subtitles. So, this is a technical problem that we have to consider. Why do English comedies come across so well all over the world? Because English is spoken in more countries, it’s easier to understand. And there are comedies that are based not so much on language but also on gestures or comic situations. From my experience there are some countries that refuse comedy. Japan, for example, has never been a market for comedy. On principle, comedies are very difficult for a Japanese audience. I can give you some interesting facts about Italian films: many years ago, Iran used to be the first country for the sale of our Italian comedies, and we still them to Iran today, though with many censorship limitations. I think there are some populations that are very close to our humour, for instance Russia. We have a comedy that will be released soon in one hundred prints, dubbed in Russian. It’s a comedy that is very successful in Italy, by Federico Moccia, a cult teen-age writer and first-time director. The film has made over €20 million in Italy and there is a distributor in Russia who firmly believes that this kind of
humour can be successful there. Russia is a country where Italian humour is understood very well. In Italy, Adriano Celentano is truly a myth, as an actor and a singer - in Russia he’s God! There are other territories - you would be surprised - like Taiwan and Hong Kong, where they appreciate Italian humour. Yet these films are perhaps not distributed in Spain, or in other countries you would think were culturally closer to Italian humour.

**ENR:** Maybe we can include Spain here, I guess you also have great challenges with getting Spanish films to travel?

**Antonio Saura:** In Spain we try to have our movies travel, and of course we fail, like most of us. And, you know, a long time ago Spain was an empire and in a lot of countries they kept our language - so in principle we should have a great market. But they developed into different languages so today I don’t understand a word of what the Argentineans say and they don’t understand us, and we both don’t understand the Colombians and so on. So we don’t have a market - to cut it short. And the few movies that travel are the serious ones. Don’t ask me why!

**ENR:** So what about Denmark, do Danish films travel?

**Per Nielsen:** Well, I did some homework. I forwarded the questions to some of the main players in Scandinavian film in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. Nobody in Denmark replied. *(laughter)* But in Sweden four people did, and one of them was the head of the Swedish television’s drama department. And he said, why should humour travel? *(laughter)* He compares it to the fact that we don’t try to export our national customs. From Norway the well-known writer Harald Rosenlow-Eeg answered, the author of *Hawaii, Oslo*. And he says that what we laugh about is what we fear. And it really makes sense. The more jokes you make about homosexuals, the more homophobic you are. So he says the good thing would be to find something that you are really afraid of. That would be something that would travel. And then, the head of production for the Swedish Film Institute said: it’s a very difficult question. *(laughter & applause)* I think humour in itself does travel but not the films. It doesn’t sell.

**AC:** We often sell remake rights of our films to the US and this has been going on for a number of years. They want to do them in their own way, their own language. So there is another aspect to this.

**ENR:** What are future strategies? How can we improve the situation?

**PN:** There are so many problems that we don’t even know where to start. I remember a couple of years ago, *Valhalla*, an old cartoon film, had been sold to the United States. And when it was sent to the US, they sent it back and said, you have to do something about the chickens. Why would we have to do something about the chickens? You see, in the United States, chickens don’t have assholes. *(laughter)* We’re talking about animated characters. So what they did was they employed thirty people to remove the assholes. Can you imagine being one of those people?

**AC:** I think that the problem with all European films is distribution which is overwhelmed by the American studios taking up all the theatres and leaving independent distributors a very little niche for European films. This morning I heard someone say, we had the Truffauts in the past and we don’t have anybody today. That’s not true! We have very good European films today, as we did in the past, but we don’t have the distribution. And the main thing is television. European television stations don’t programme European films. They programme American films at prime time all the time. We don’t take advantage, we don’t give visibility to our films in Europe. This is the problem because television would give visibility to our films, to make our stars known. But if we don’t get our films into theatres and on television it’s useless!

**AS:** The challenge no longer lies in the theatres, it’s the internet and television. If we don’t market our movies, if we don’t create an awareness for our movies, we’re dead. We have to continue to address the issue of communication and marketing, it’s not only distribution. I think we have to find
ways to make our creators and our comedians travel, make them known internationally. Humour is very much related to the way we live. And one thing we’ve been very good at in Europe is to not understand the way our neighbours live. How can I laugh about people leading a life that I don’t understand? We need to start sharing information about the way we are and how we live. Humour is normally based on playing with the realities around you, but if you don’t know these realities, who cares?

Q: I’ve been hearing a lot about exporting films throughout Europe, and a lot of references to American cinema. But one thing American cinema does is that it designs for export, in the development process. Even from the beginning, there is a lot of concern.

AS: I don’t agree. I mean, they have great marketing departments. But the reality is that they look for the right talent to do the best movie they can, and then they promote it. And they know that they have the distribution - they can count on those markets because they know that they will have access to them. We cannot count on having access to those markets. I cannot go and think internationally because I will never get there. I’d better be very close to my market, to make sure that at least my market responds. I mean, this sounds as if they do it so well and so on. No! They dominate, they know for sure that they have this access, have this distribution, and then we’re swallowed!

PN: It’s probably a wonderful thought for the United States but we don’t have studios like that in Europe.