

## The Acting President

Trump is a hyper-narcissist performance artist charismatic rough beast. As for Bannon, he is Trump's Barnum.

Richard Schechner<sup>1</sup>

He offers a barking carnival act that can be best described as Trumpism.

Rick Perry<sup>2</sup>

YouGov, the online pollsters of public opinion, conducted a survey in the UK in 2012 to see *What Voters Really Think of Parliament and Our Politicians*. That was the survey's subtitle. Its main title was *Democracy on Trial*.<sup>3</sup> Judging from its reported findings, democracy was found guilty on all charges. The main indictment was against the trustworthiness of politicians. The report tells us that two-thirds of respondents believed that 'however they start out, most MPs "end up becoming remote from the everyday lives and concerns of the people they represent"'.<sup>4</sup> Shockingly, almost the same proportion agreed that 'politicians tell lies all the time – you can't believe a word they say'.<sup>5</sup> The section containing those two findings opened with a gloss by YouGov journalist Peter Kellner, author of the report, where he opined: 'If Parliament is the principal stage on which democracy is displayed, MPs are the principal actors.'<sup>6</sup> He was making the point that politicians are judged by the appeal and persuasiveness of their rhetorical performance. This is made express in the title to a prize-winning article by scholar Alan Finlayson: 'Proving, Pleasing and Persuading? Rhetoric in Contemporary British Politics'.<sup>7</sup> Finlayson cites research conducted by the Fabian Society which found that if non-voters and

<sup>1</sup> Richard Schechner, 'Donald John Trump, President?' (2017) 61(2) *The Drama Review* 7–10, 9

<sup>2</sup> Zeke J. Miller, 'Rick Perry Calls Donald Trump a Cancer and Carnival Act', *Time*, 22 July 2015, <https://time.com/3968398/donald-trump-rick-perry-cancer/>. Rick Perry was a rival to Trump for the Republican nomination for president and subsequently secretary of energy in the Trump administration.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Kellner, *Democracy on Trial: What Voters Really Think of Parliament and Our Politicians* (YouGov; The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, March 2012).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 6, table 4. <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 6. <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>7</sup> Alan Finlayson, 'Proving, Pleasing and Persuading? Rhetoric in Contemporary British Politics' (2014) 85(4) *The Political Quarterly* 428–436.

swing voters could change one thing about British politics it would be ‘politicians themselves: who they are, *the way that they talk and act*’.<sup>8</sup>

If voters are as much persuaded by the charisma of a politician’s personal performance as by their policies, it should not surprise us that actors have sometimes successfully made the move from showbiz to the business of government. President Reagan and Governor Schwarzenegger are well-known examples. Sometimes the substance exceeds the show, as it does in the case of the actor Volodymyr Zelensky, who at the time of writing stands centre stage of global politics as the feted wartime president of Ukraine. With other performers, a spectacular show might make up for lesser substance. What John L. Styan observed in relation to theatrical acting is equally true of political performance: ‘[a] profound idea only partly communicated is as nothing against a shallow one wholly communicated: content, form and medium cannot be judged apart’.<sup>9</sup> Early modern rhetorician Thomas Wilson made much the same point when he observed that ‘an eloquent man being smally learned’ can be much more persuasive than ‘a great learned clarke . . . wanting words to set forth his meaning’.<sup>10</sup> Donald Trump has been a major beneficiary of voters’ susceptibility to persuasive political performance, and his performative prowess might be said to have overcome what Wilson calls small learning and Styan calls ideas of a shallow sort. His supporters will like the substance of what he says every bit as much as they like his style, but in relation to a strongly partisan section of the electorate the opinions of card-carrying supporters have little bearing on effective persuasion. In the 2016 presidential election campaign, neither Trump nor Clinton had to do much, if anything, to persuade their dedicated followers. It is in relation to the minority of undecided voters – the floating or swing voters – that the persuasiveness of rhetorical performance comes most strongly into play.<sup>11</sup>

What Donald Trump lacks in political education he has made up for through practical experience in the entertainment industry, and especially through his role as host of the popular programme *The Apprentice*. The format of that show – in which business hopefuls compete for the chance of employment in Trump’s business empire – is one that encourages conflict, egocentricity, autocracy, and snap judgments of a career-defining sort. It was ideal preparation for the president he became. If, as commentators have observed, US presidential rhetoric has evolved from addressing the US

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 428, emphasis in original, citing Ed Wallis and Ania Skrzypek-Claassens (eds), *Back to Earth: Reconnecting People and Politics* (London: The Fabian Society, 2014) 9–10, <https://fabians.org.uk/publication/back-to-earth/>.

<sup>9</sup> John L. Styan, *Drama, Stage and Audience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975) 239.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Wilson, *The Arte of Rhetorique* (London: Richard Grafton, 1553) (1560), G. H. Mair (ed.) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909) 161.

<sup>11</sup> David B. Holian and Charles Prysby, ‘Polls and Elections: Did Character Count? Candidate Traits and the 2016 Presidential Vote’ (2020) 50(3) *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 666–689, 684.

Congress to addressing the public directly,<sup>12</sup> then Trump's televisual and Twitter presidency can be regarded as the culmination of the process – at once its zenith and its nadir.<sup>13</sup> The argument that Trump brought the values and practices of popular entertainment to presidential politics is the governing theme of the 2020 BBC documentary *The Trump Show*.<sup>14</sup> Originally a three-part series, a fourth part, 'Downfall', was added in 2021 to document the last days of Trump's presidency culminating in the infamous incursion into the Capitol Building by a mob of his supporters on 6 January 2021. The title *The Trump Show* may be an allusion to the 1998 movie *The Truman Show*, in which Truman Burbank (played by Jim Carrey) is a normal Joe who doesn't realize that everything in his life has been staged to deliver a reality TV show in which he is the star. The argument of *The Trump Show* is that the reality TV star turned president, turned the presidency into a reality TV show. Even Trump's critics acknowledge his knack for producing an entertaining performance. Jonathan Karl, chief White House correspondent for *ABC News* during the Trump presidency, was especially struck by Trump's remarkable stage-managed meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. *The Trump Show* shows him smiling broadly at the sheer chutzpah of it all: 'It was mind-blowing. I mean, it was showmanship of the highest order' (ep. 1, 57'20). Tim Alberta, chief political correspondent for *Politico Magazine*, echoes the sentiment:

Donald Trump, who has an insatiable thirst for reality television style drama saw an opportunity to be the star of the biggest show in global politics. (ep. 1, 57'40)

This is Donald Trump sending a message to the political establishment at home and internationally, that there's a new sheriff in town and the presidency was going to be show business. (ep. 1, 58'10)

Near the start of the 'Downfall' episode, British politician and Trump confidante Nigel Farage called Trump's performance in the 2020 presidential campaign rallies 'a level of political showmanship the world has never seen before, and I'm going to predict now will never see again' (ep. 4, 1'37). Where Truman Burbank was the only person in his world not 'in the know', the documentary makes clear that Trump is well aware of the production values in the performance of his political brand. A suitable subtitle for the BBC documentary, and the title I have chosen for this chapter, would be 'The Acting President', for Trump is an actor through and through – even in the sense of being adept in the art of *actio*, which is the classical rhetorical term for the use

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Jeffrey K. Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

<sup>13</sup> See, generally, Michele Lockhart (ed.) *President Donald Trump and His Political Discourse: Ramifications of Rhetoric via Twitter* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2019).

<sup>14</sup> BBC and 72 Films, *The Trump Show* (dir. Rob Coldstream, 2020).

of hand gestures. We will return to his hands later. What *The Trump Show* demonstrates, and what is in any case clear to a casual observer, is that Trump was somehow able to dominate the political scene through his natural mastery of performative techniques. Why devote a chapter to the performative rhetoric of this one former president? The simple and sobering answer is that he came to power in one of the world's most free and open democracies and his show turned out (through unprecedented insurrection and impeachment) to be as shallow as it had been seductive. If '[e]lections are a mix of reality TV, drama, and soap opera',<sup>15</sup> the case of Trump the reality TV president supplies an exemplary instance of a performative demagogue and a warning for all time.

The 'reality' in 'reality television' seems an odd descriptor for a genre of entertainment which is highly hyperbolic, exaggerated, and frankly unrealistic. The truth, though, is that such shows can perform and become a sort of reality for participants and viewers alike. Their reality is the heightened reality of the theatrical stage. The celebrated actor Sir Ian McKellen once said something that is relevant in this regard and also highly pertinent to this book's general concern with the fashioning of the world. He was speaking many years ago as a talk-show interviewee in the context of a discussion on the nature of realistic theatrical acting through the centuries since Shakespeare's day. He made the point that the acting style of the Victorian actor Henry Irving in the play *The Bells* would seem melodramatic to us today but would have seemed perfectly realistic to the tastes of audiences at the time. Sir Ian's pithy summary was this: 'fashions of reality change'.<sup>16</sup> The new reality of our time is the reality of the unreal – the reality of virtual reality and of the reality 'show'. Trump, as showman, has an innate feel for what plays well in these times. He has a performer's instinct for forming a public persona and a maker's instinct for moulding and mobilizing the mass of voters. In the hands of such a player, realities can be refashioned. In *The Trump Show*, Jon Sopel, the North America editor for the BBC, issues a warning: 'I think people underestimate him at their peril. He understands theatre. Understands entertainment. Understands politics as entertainment' (ep. 1, 25'30).

To know for sure that Donald Trump conceived his presidency as a continuation of his reality television performance, we needn't rely solely upon the testimony of his supporting cast. Near the beginning of the second episode of *The Trump Show*, the man himself gives the game away when an archive clip shows him at the start of the first cabinet meeting of 2018 saying: 'Welcome back to the studio!' (ep. 2, 2'5). Sara Brady writes in a personal communication with performance scholar Richard Schechner that Trump's performance is 'not acting/theatre and it's not performance/art. It's a category

<sup>15</sup> Phil Mercer, 'Australia TV Networks Jostle for Viewership in Election Coverage', *BBC News Sydney*, 21 May 2022.

<sup>16</sup> *The Dick Cavett Show* (11 November 1981).

of reality TV, of “theatre of the real” . . . It’s not about authentic, or true, or false, or fake. Simply: it’s “good television”.<sup>17</sup>

One of the talking heads on *The Trump Show* is Omarosa Manigault Newman. She was the director of African American outreach for Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign and joined his White House team as an assistant to the president and director of communications for the Office of Public Liaison. She first met Trump when she appeared as a contestant on *The Apprentice*. Jonathan Capehart, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist from the *Washington Post*, interviewed Newman in August 2015. His reflections on that interview are extremely informative:

The thing she said was, Jonathan, reality television has taken over America. Donald Trump is the reality television king. He is now bringing that to Presidential politics and you are making a mistake if you try to view him through a Presidential prism. You need to view him through this pop culture reality television prism. And I was having a hard time with that. Three years later I have no hard time at all. I completely see it. Everything I know about Donald Trump and learned about Donald Trump I learned from Omarosa.<sup>18</sup>

Ms Newman picks up her theme again on *The Trump Show* when, around halfway through the first episode, she says that people were selected for Trump’s White House team ‘based on their look. A lot of the briefing materials would have a photo clipped on it . . . it was almost like a casting call.’

## A Skirmisher Enters the Fray

The award for most entertaining cameo played out in Trump’s inner circle goes to financier Anthony Scaramucci. He acted (in every sense of the word) as Trump’s White House director of communications for a period of just eleven days. A confident and brash New Yorker, he blazed into his post and then blazed out of it post-haste when Trump fired him for an indiscrete interview with a reporter for the *New Yorker*. That was the official reason. *The Trump Show* proposes that Scaramucci had to go because he stole Trump’s spotlight. It quotes an *ABC News* reporter who says that:

Scaramucci came in – bigger than President Trump in his own ways and received an even bigger spotlight than the boss himself and as all of us who cover this administration know that is the one way to get out of this White House. (ep. 1, 43’10)

In Trump’s reality television White House, it was not so much that life imitated art, but that art and life were indistinguishable. Scaramucci epitomizes the phenomenon, for his very name evokes the stock character of the

<sup>17</sup> Sara Brady correspondence with Richard Schechner (31 January 2017). Cited in Richard Schechner, ‘Donald John Trump, President?’ (2017) 61(2) *The Drama Review* 7–10, 9.

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Capehart, *The Beat with Ari Melber*, MSNBC (transcript, 13 August 2018).

*commedia dell'arte* known as Scaramouche, a name that rock music fans will recognize from the lyrics of rock band Queen's 'Bohemian Rhapsody'. Scaramouche derives from the Italian *scaramuccia*, meaning skirmish, and the English word skirmish is itself derived from *scaramuccia* via the French *escarmouche*. Scaramouche is an aggressive figure and a dramatically compelling one. He 'can be clever or stupid – as the actor sees fit to portray him'.<sup>19</sup> It's almost as if the young Anthony studied the role and made it his mission to give it life. Before his interview on *The Trump Show*, Scaramucci said to his interviewer, 'you don't want a boring show . . . all that spin cycle bullshit that all these political clowns give you' (ep. 1, 1'36). The irony is that Scaramucci in his *commedia* role is the purest, classic incarnation of a clown, right down to the fact that Tiberio Fiorilli (1608–1694), the actor who established the role of Scaramouche, abandoned the traditional *commedia* mask for the white facial cosmetics that we associate with the modern circus clown.<sup>20</sup> There have been many incarnations of Scaramouche down the years. One website devoted to *commedia dell'arte* even suggests that the character traits of Scaramouche were reborn in the brash *Looney Tunes* cartoon character Daffy Duck.<sup>21</sup> I would add, not just his character but also his clothes – since Daffy's colouring resembles Scaramouche's all-black costume with white ruff. Scholars have argued that 'the success of Trump's candidacy in the 2016 Republican primary was in part due to its value as comedic entertainment'.<sup>22</sup> For the offence of encroaching on Trump's comedic prerogative, Anthony Scaramucci simply had to go.

### Off the Cuff or with a Script Up His Sleeve?

It is difficult to discern in Trump's performance when and to what extent it is scripted and stage-managed and to what extent it is off the cuff. As regards the lowest point of his performance in office, which was surely his refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy of the 2020 election results and his conspiratorial allegations of election fraud, there is good reason to believe that there was nothing ad-lib about it. Trump had prepared that script many years previously. This is a point convincingly made in episode four of *The Trump Show*, 'Downfall'.

Tim O'Brien recounts an airplane flight with Trump when he was conducting research for his 2005 biography *TrumpNation: The Art of Being the Donald*.<sup>23</sup> On the flight, Trump watched the 1941 cinematic masterpiece

<sup>19</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scaramouche> (1 February 2023).

<sup>20</sup> John Rudlin, *Commedia Dell'Arte: An Actor's Handbook* (London: Routledge, 1994) 152.

<sup>21</sup> <https://sites.google.com/site/italiancommedia/the-characters> (1 February 2023).

<sup>22</sup> Kira Hall, Donna M. Goldstein, and Matthew Bruce Ingram, 'The Hands of Donald Trump: Entertainment, Gesture, Spectacle' (2016) 6(2) *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 71–100, 71.

<sup>23</sup> Tim O'Brien, *TrumpNation: The Art of Being the Donald* (New York: Warner Books, 2005).

*Citizen Kane*, acted and directed by Orson Welles. Trump is said to have paused the film at one point and said to O'Brien, 'this is an amazing scene'. The scene is the one in which a newspaper owned by Charles Foster Kane runs the headline 'Fraud at the polls' after Kane loses a political election. It seems that Trump kept the script to that scene filed away for many years and might have pulled it out for the 2016 election had he lost it. We can deduce this from his third televised presidential debate with Hillary Clinton (20 October 2016), in which the convenor asked Trump if he was prepared to commit to the principle of peacefully conceding to Clinton in the event of losing the election. Trump replied, 'I will tell you at the time. I'll keep you in suspense, okay?' The fact that he won in 2016 meant that the *Citizen Kane* script could be kept under wraps on that occasion, but when he lost the 2020 election it was duly dusted off. Kane's 'Fraud at the polls' became Trump's 'Stop the Steal', a slogan coined by right-wing political agitator Roger Stone in 2016.<sup>24</sup> Regardless of the shortcomings of its ideology, the slogan 'Stop the Steal' is a brilliant example of rhetorically effective drafting. It is in form a simple tricolon of monosyllabic words with a powerful alliterative repetition of the 'st' sound. No sound is rhetorically more potent than 'st', for it is the sound of stasis. It is the sound of a static obstacle or state which an active political movement will instinctively desire to shift and overcome. The effect of the 'st' sound has been deeply embedded in human psychology since prehistoric times. It is a potent example of sound symbolism, for the 'st' sound – which supplies our language of stasis, stopping, and standstill – is itself made when the mouth brings the movement of air to an abrupt stop.<sup>25</sup> Probably unintentionally, Trump used the 'st ... the st ...' slogan as a way to depict the Democrat's election victory as a stubborn obstacle to be overcome.

### Trump's Two Tongues

Several commentators have remarked upon Trump's use of simple speech. An article titled 'Trump's cleverest trick is sounding stupid' notes that the Flesch-Kincaid readability test assesses Trump's language to be pitched at the level of nine- and ten-year-olds, Hillary Clinton's at thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds, and George Washington's 1796 farewell address at university degree level.<sup>26</sup> Others have noted that Trump's language is a highly polarized mix of phrases, some of which appeal more to men and others more to women.<sup>27</sup> What has not been closely analysed is the way in which Trump frequently combines a highbrow, presidential style alongside a low-brow, populist style within a

<sup>24</sup> Rob Kuznia, Curt Devine, Nelli Black, and Drew Griffin, 'Stop the Steal's Massive Disinformation Campaign Connected to Roger Stone', CNN, 14 November 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Gary Watt, *Shakespeare's Acts of Will: Law, Testament and Properties of Performance*, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Bloomsbury, 2016) 137.

<sup>26</sup> Ben MacIntyre, 'Trump's Cleverest Trick Is Sounding Stupid' *The Times*, 13 May 2016.

<sup>27</sup> Claire Cain Miller, 'Measuring Trump's Language' *New York Times*, 14 March 2016.

single passage of speech. This enables him to speak to two audiences at once. Instances of Trump's double-speak are too numerous to list, but there are several examples in Trump's first official press conference as president held on 16 February 2017 in which Trump expressly addressed two different audiences at the same time: 'I'm making this presentation directly to the American people, with the media present.'<sup>28</sup> He was talking *at* the media, but he was talking *to* the people. The following short passage from that press conference illustrates the way that he uses pithy repetitions (underlined) and colloquial language (italicized) alongside more highbrow clauses to speak in two registers at once with the aim of satisfying the immediate audience of news reporters while appealing directly to members of the wider public audience watching from their homes:

The press has become so dishonest that if we don't talk about it, we are doing a tremendous disservice to the American people. Tremendous disservice. *We have to talk about it . . . to find out what's going on, because the press honestly is out of control.* The level of dishonesty is out of control. (4'17)

Examples of Trump's two-tongued technique can be found in every one of his campaign speeches. Listed next are just a few of the many instances that appear in a single speech delivered at a 2020 presidential election rally in Rome, Georgia.<sup>29</sup> In each case, the phrase that demonstrates his low-brow linguistic mode appears in italics to contrast it to the more sophisticated style of the text immediately preceding it. Repetition is again underlined:

With your vote, we will continue to cut your taxes, cut regulations, support our police, support our great military, protect your second amendment . . . Defend religious liberty, and ensure more products are proudly stamped with that beautiful phrase 'Made in the USA.' *That's happening.* (2'14)

Biden has vowed to abolish American oil, fracking, natural gas. *You ever see a guy fracking?* (7'31)

As long as I'm president, we will remain number one producer of oil and natural gas anywhere in the world. *We are now number one.* (9'29)

Joe Biden is a globalist who spent 47 years outsourcing your jobs, opening your borders and sacrificing American blood and treasure in endless foreign Wars. *Don't worry, they're all coming home.* (12'20)

If you want a vaccine to kill the virus, a job to support your family well, and freedom to live your life, then go cast your ballot for a man named Trump. *We're doing a job. We're doing a job together.* (25'15)

We will mass distribute the vaccine in just a few short weeks and it will quickly help us to eradicate it. *It's going to go anyway.* (21'15)

<sup>28</sup> Donald Trump, First Presidential Press Conference (16 February 2017).

<sup>29</sup> Donald Trump, Rally Speech (Rome, GA, 1 November 2020).



The last example in this list illustrates perfectly the dumbing down technique of Trump's two-tongued technique. Just in case the word 'eradicate' has too many syllables for some of his audience, he translates it immediately as 'going to go'. Journalist Ben MacIntyre observes that 'Trump's unique brand of Basic English may sound stupid to some but it is highly effective, carefully calculated, and the shape of things to come'.<sup>30</sup> How 'carefully calculated' (as opposed to instinctive) it may be doubted, but Trump's double-speak is certainly effective. Part of its appeal to his supporters may lie in its ability to mimic their own hotchpot patterns of thought. Journalist and Trump biographer Gwenda Blair notes that Trump's habit of speaking in 'incomplete thoughts and sentence fragments has an unmediated, stream-of-consciousness feel', so that for the members of his audience the way he talks amplifies 'the voice inside their own heads – a rich and sometimes dark stew of conversational snippets and memory scraps, random phrases and half-thoughts'.<sup>31</sup> Incoherence also has the advantage of shifting the work of solving the puzzle onto the audience, which not only captures the listeners' attention but also leaves them with the Making Sense that they had a hand in constructing the outcome as co-Creator and co-Producer. Whatever its merits or demerits, Trump's language is undeniably a key factor in creating his distinctive brand. As linguist Jennifer Sclafani acknowledges in a video interview for the *Washington Post*: 'You can use language to construct an identity ... that works towards creating an authentic persona that people will pay attention to' (7 July 2017).

## The Making Sense of Trump's Hand Gestures

We now turn to consider another symbolic register in Trump's performance repertoire – the action of his hands. The very word 'action' is a cousin to 'agriculture', the connection being the idea of driving on beasts. This early association with the manual work of driving animals was later coupled with driving on a lawsuit (hence 'legal action') and with the gestural rhetorical performance of the hand (called '*actio*') by which charismatic politicians drive their followers on in something like the way that a gesticulating shepherd drives sheep into an obedient flock. This idea of 'driving people on' is the precise etymology of the word 'demagogue', which is worth bearing in mind as we come to puzzle Donald Trump's distinctive and seemingly innate aptitude for gestural performance. As with his linguistic register, Trump's register of manual gestures employs a sort of double-speak. This could be read as a sign of weakness or confusion, but on the contrary it seems to serve him well as a way of appealing to a broad range of gestural spectators through a single performance event, just as his linguistic double-speak helps him to connect to

<sup>30</sup> Ben MacIntyre, 'Trump's Cleverest Trick Is Sounding Stupid' *The Times*, 13 May 2016.

<sup>31</sup> Gwenda Blair, 'Inside the Mind of Donald Trump', *The Guardian*, 12 November 2016.

socially higher and lower sections of his audience through a blend of higher and lower modes of speech. The authors of the article ‘The Hands of Donald Trump’ advance the theory that Donald Trump is popular because he is a comedic performer. They make the point that comedy is a language that works on more than one level and therefore transcends differences in social status and taste:

[S]treet performers, clowns, criminals, or jokers may become popular – and valuable – precisely because of their skill at entertaining. In the liminal space of comedic entertainment, distinct identities of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture may remain in the interpretation of verbal and gestural form, but viewers laugh, even if not for the same reason.<sup>32</sup>

Trump’s mixed gestural language, particularly his favoured technique of blending expansive gestures with pinpointing gestures, allows him to convey the sense that he knows how to use the broad brush as well as the fine needle. A great deal has been written about Trump’s idiosyncratic gestural idiom. My aim in this section is not to duplicate the vast volume of observations and analysis that has been offered up by psychologists, rhetoricians, and experts in performance and communication, but to select and synthesize some of their insights to propose and support a new theory about Trump’s gestural symbols. The theory is that Trump’s gestures start to make integrated sense when we see them as gestures of making. This is in addition to, and without prejudice to, the suggestion that Trump’s gestures can be read as elements in a comedic routine. After all, comedy can itself be considered a mode of making, one which makes communities by making people laugh at the folly that makes us who we are.

Trump is a maker. As a businessman he makes deals and makes money. As a celebrity he makes television. In the 2016 presidential election he made ‘making’ the central message of his campaign, promising to ‘Make America Great Again’ and to ‘Build a Wall’. Since effective performance in rhetoric and theatre demands that the action should suit the word, and the word suit the action (a paraphrase of Shakespeare’s Prince Hamlet), it should follow that ‘making’ will be as central to Trump’s gestures as to his speech. This is indeed what we find, for his gestural repertoire can be read as mimes in which he performs fabricating manipulations of invisible stuff. The abstract to the article ‘The Hands of Donald Trump’ hints at this reading when it observes that ‘Trump crafts with his hands to . . . accrue visual capital in a mediatized twenty-first-century politics that is celebrity driven’.<sup>33</sup> At another point in their account the same authors even compare one of Trump’s signature moves

<sup>32</sup> Kira Hall, Donna M. Goldstein, and Matthew Bruce Ingram, ‘The Hands of Donald Trump: Entertainment, Gesture, Spectacle’ (2016) 6(2) *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 71–100, 73.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

to a mode of culinary craft. We will come to that and to other specific examples of Trump's 'making' mimes shortly. The broader point is that Trump's gestural activity is rhetorically persuasive not only because it entices the spectator to enjoy the comedic exaggeration of his gestural performance, but also because it draws the observer into a sense of participation in Trump's projects of making. Television audiences are especially seduced by programmes – including gardening shows, DIY shows, and cooking shows – that offer the vicarious experience of manual making. It is not insignificant, therefore, that Trump's former television show, *The Apprentice*, challenged competing teams to make a success of a weekly task which very often involved manual making. Examples included the restoration or renovation of real estate locations, the devising of new ice-cream flavours, designing a new pizza, and making chocolate bars, cupcakes, and pies. The very first episode of the very first series set a task that is the American cultural archetype of making stuff in order to make money – selling home-made lemonade from a street stall. Before we turn to some specific examples of the making mode in Trump's manual performance, it is useful to make one or two general points about his gestural idiom.

The first point is that Trump's gestures are extremely dynamic. Trump's involvement in high-paced business is expressed through the frenetic busyness of his hands. He is active – always doing, doing, doing. His hyperactive hands mirror this not only through their perpetual motion but also through the remarkable way they leap from one type of motion to another. He takes his hands, or his hands take him, on an ever-circling tour of his favourite gestural topics – moving from his expansive, double-handed, symmetrical, open-palm-facing-forward, outward-circling, 'window-cleaner' action (which I call his 'large circle') to his precise one-handed pinched circlet of thumb and finger (which I call his 'small circlet'). The latter is Trump's signature gesture. When Michelle Obama gave a celebrated speech denouncing 'hateful language . . . from public figures on TV' and someone who is 'cruel or acts like a bully', she did not refer to Trump by name, but by using his signature 'small circlet' gesture we were left in no doubt that he was the target of her denunciation.<sup>34</sup> Trump tours through his repertoire of stock gestures like a businessman doing his rounds – checking off his stocks, looking in on his projects one by one. We will shortly see that his two gestural poles – the large circle and small circlet – are especially useful for illustrating the way in which Trump's gestural language conveys the Making Sense.

A second general and foundational feature of Trump's hand gestures is that taken together they are expansive – ambitious in a spatial sense. This sprawling attribute is entirely to be expected from a man who is personally ambitious and larger than life, who is physically tall and corpulent and

<sup>34</sup> Michelle Obama, Democratic National Convention (Wells Fargo Center, Philadelphia, PA, 25 July 2016).

extremely proud of his big hair. Trump's costume is also larger than life. His unusually long ties and excessively baggy suits are clown-like. Writing in *Vanity Fair*, Kenzie Bryant conjectures that Trump's ever-widening trouser legs might be down to the fact that he is shrinking with age or that he is wearing the cut of trouser favoured by Juggalos – the hardcore fans of hip hop duo Insane Clown Posse who are frequently to be seen sporting clown wigs and make-up.<sup>35</sup> Sometime British Prime Minister Boris Johnson is another political leader who favours the clown cut of baggy clothing and a 'cut' of hair that is even more clownish than Trump's.<sup>36</sup> Boris Johnson's nickname 'BoJo' is quite at home in the pantheon of famous clowns alongside Bozo, Coco, Vercoe, and Blinko. The Italian press, attuned to their native tradition of *commedia dell'arte*, seized upon Johnson's clown-like persona in the aftermath of his resignation on 7 July 2022. *Corriere della sera* presented a photo gallery with the title 'Bojo the Clown Surrenders'.<sup>37</sup> In England, *The Economist* covered the resignation with the pithy front-page headline 'Clownfall' (9 July 2022). The ancient Greek comic actors preferred to wear tights, but in two respects their costume has come down to Trump, for they wore heavy padding and exhibited a large phallus.<sup>38</sup> In Trump's case the padding is his own actual flesh, and the phallus is his long dangling tie.<sup>39</sup> The long tie survives to this day as a staple of the costume of circus clowns. As to the colour, Trump's preference for a red tie on a white shirt is no doubt a nod to the red of the Republican Party, but it inadvertently serves a deeper semiotic purpose, for red against white is one of the most ancient and innate signs of dramatic, ritual performance.<sup>40</sup> Red on white, whether in the form of a red wax seal on white parchment, or blood on white skin, is the primal and archetypal sign – indeed, the word 'seal' is itself derived from the Latin for 'small sign'.

The expansiveness of Trump's tie, baggy trousers, big hair, and bulging body extends even to a tendency to splay his fingers apart. Swell sells, and Trump wants us to know that he's Mr Big and a swell guy. It is no surprise therefore that Trump bristles at any suggestion that his hands might in fact be on the small side. He was acutely defensive in response to a political rival's mischievous implication that Trump's manual shortcomings might be

<sup>35</sup> Kenzie Bryant, 'What Is Going on with Trump's Pant Legs? One Humble Theory', *Vanity Fair*, 5 April 2018.

<sup>36</sup> Edward Docx, 'The Clown King: How Boris Johnson Made It by Playing the Fool', *The Guardian*, 18 March 2021. Mr Docx reprised his theme after Johnson's resignation: 'The Death of "Boris" the Clown', *The New Statesman*, 13 July 2022.

<sup>37</sup> 'Bojo the Clown si è Arreso', *Corriere della sera*, 8 July 2022.

<sup>38</sup> Allardyce Nicoll, *Masks, Mimes and Miracles: Studies in the Popular Theatre* (1931) (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1963) 62.

<sup>39</sup> Claire Robinson, 'The Phallic Necktie Is an Outdated Symbol of White Male Rule in New Zealand's Parliament', *The Guardian*, 8 February 2021.

<sup>40</sup> Gary Watt, 'Black and White and Red All over: Bloody Performance in Theatre and Law' (2017) 28(2) *Anglistik* 23–33.

mirrored in the scale of another anatomical extremity.<sup>41</sup> Trump countered in a televised *Fox News* debate by proudly splaying his hands and, dismissing the implied slight of his manhood, assured his audience, ‘I guarantee you there’s no problem’.<sup>42</sup> As he uttered that guarantee his left hand delicately alighted on the mic stand in a manner that might have been a Freudian slip. Trump’s standard gesture of splayed fingers may be an instance of the sort of dominance displays – especially those that give the impression of superior size – that are exhibited by mammalian males across a wide range of species. In addition to the size aspect, there is also a vigour, performative energy, and dynamism in the splayed fingers. That dynamism is lacking in the stock gestures so often favoured by other politicians, such as the chopping axe-hand (favoured by Hillary Clinton) and Barack Obama’s clenched ‘signature precision-grip gesture’ (discussed later).<sup>43</sup> It is almost as if Trump’s hands have internalized the secrets of dynamic dance. The famous ‘jazz hands’ dance move, for example, is performed with elbows in at the waist and arms out to the side with fingers splayed. One online tutor advises the dancer to ‘think of energy shooting out from each fingertip’.<sup>44</sup>

The authors of ‘The Hands of Donald Trump’ repeat a question that has been asked frequently by bemused political commentators: ‘How does a businessman situated in the uppermost tier of American wealth capture the allegiance of the working classes?’<sup>45</sup> The authors of the article put it down to his class-transcending comedic appeal, but concealed in their question and buried in their own analytical response another answer presents itself – it is that Trump appeals to manual workers because his hands are always manually at work, and specifically at work in gestured processes of manufacture. Unlike members of the orthodox political cadre, Trump has seldom been accused of craftiness, artfulness, and subtle manipulation. This may be because the brute openness of his gestures combined with other aspects of his performance suggests a lack of guile. His hand actions are those of a down-to-earth crafter, an artisan – a manipulator only in the sense that he constantly mimes manual making.

## Kneading Bread, Pulling Thread

We now consider two of Trump’s gestures in detail to demonstrate how they mirror manual activities of making. There are, of course, a great many more

<sup>41</sup> Fox News Debate (3 March 2016).

<sup>42</sup> Rebecca Kaplan, ‘Marco Rubio Goes after Donald Trump’s “Small Hands”’, *CBS News*, 29 February 2016.

<sup>43</sup> Jennifer Sclafani, *Talking Donald Trump: A Sociolinguistic Study of Style, Metadiscourse, and Political Identity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018) 62.

<sup>44</sup> ‘How to Do Jazz Hands – Beginning Jazz Steps’, YouDance.com (YouTube channel).

<sup>45</sup> Kira Hall, Donna M. Goldstein, and Matthew Bruce Ingram, ‘The Hands of Donald Trump: Entertainment, Gesture, Spectacle’ (2016) 6(2) *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 71–100, 71.

gestures in Trump's range, but these two – the 'large circle' and the 'small circlet' – are a good starting point because they lie at polar extremes as being respectively one of the most expansive and one of the most tightly focused actions in his repertoire.

We will commence with Trump's 'large-circle' gesture – his double-handed, symmetrical, open-handed, palms facing the viewer, window-cleaning action. Jennifer Sclafani observes that this tends to move 'either in the vertical (downward-moving) or horizontal (outward-moving) direction', which she likens to two different modes of manual craft – kneading-dough and combing out tangled threads – saying that:

[T]he openhanded configuration of his hands [gives] the impression not that he is trying to pinpoint an idea but is instead trying to 'flatten' (in the case of vertical downward movement) or 'spread' (in the case of horizontal-outward movement) an idea. Together these movements recall the action of kneading and stretching pizza dough – taking something amorphous and putting some shape to it. Finally, the spreading of the fingers give the impression that he is combing his way through a large snarl . . . Trump's indexical gestures . . . construct Trump as the big, strong, forceful Washington outsider who will comb through the current political mess the country is in and will restore order to American life.<sup>46</sup>

In the early days of the 2020 US presidential campaign, *Sky News Australia* interviewed Louise Mahler, billed as 'Australia's leading body language expert', who gushed that 'Donald Trump is the master of body language'.<sup>47</sup> She might not like him or his politics, but as a professional gesture analyst, she was impressed by his performative prowess. (Another body language expert, Mary Civiello, acknowledges likewise that 'he's entertaining, even if you don't buy a thing he's saying'.)<sup>48</sup> Louise Mahler singled out his large-circle gesture as the 'key tool' by which he is able to 'work with people, so that they come with him'. As she demonstrated the gesture, she emphasized that it operates by bringing his supporters in. As if working a ball of dough, Trump constantly massages his audience, presses them, and pulls them, until they are worked into his project and manipulated into the form of a mass. He kneads his support base as if it were a pizza base.

The authors of 'The Hands of Donald Trump' mention in passing that Trump 'used his craft as an entertainer to forge a new hybrid of politics and comedy',<sup>49</sup> but it could also be his craft as a manual maker, a manipulator of

<sup>46</sup> Jennifer Sclafani, *Talking Donald Trump: A Sociolinguistic Study of Style, Metadiscourse, and Political Identity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018) 62.

<sup>47</sup> 'Trump Is the "Master of Body Language"', *Sky News Australia*, 7 March 2020.

<sup>48</sup> 'What Donald Trump's Hand Gestures Say about Him', *BBC News*, 17 August 2016.

<sup>49</sup> Kira Hall, Donna M. Goldstein, and Matthew Bruce Ingram, 'The Hands of Donald Trump: Entertainment, Gesture, Spectacle' (2016) 6(2) *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 71–100, 75.

stuff – an actual ‘forger’ – that assists him to make contact with his support base of manual workers. This is borne out by the second of the two gestures that we focus on here: the ‘small circling’ made by pinching the thumb and index finger together while splaying the non-pinching digits outwards and upwards. The small circling is a species of ‘precision grip’, which, as Michael Lempert explains, ‘refers to a family of gestures . . . named for the prehensile motion in which something small appears to be grasped’.<sup>50</sup> A simple way to replicate Trump’s small circling is to imagine that you are holding a sewing needle between thumb and index finger. Pretend to push the needle through cloth and then pull it up with the other fingers splayed upwards, as if drawing the thread through the fabric. Not only will this put your hand in the classic Trump small circling position, but it will force your hand to follow a typical Trump trajectory – from midriff or chest level upwards to somewhere near shoulder height. Trump’s first solo press conference after his inauguration is infamous for his lengthy (seventy-seven minute), impassioned tirade against ‘mainstream media’, and it is also notable for his heightened gestural activity, including repeated use of the small circling gesture.<sup>51</sup> The first time that he holds that gesture, rather than simply flashing it, he very clearly demonstrates the entire upwards trajectory of the needle-pulling-thread action (5’35). It’s not just a stitch. It’s a stitch up. It can be read as a sign that Trump is fabricating, or to talk in terms of another threading process – spinning a yarn. Ironically, and revealingly, he makes the fabricating gesture at precisely the moment that he says, ‘to be honest’. He then holds it until the next emphatic statement, ‘I inherited a mess’. The needle-and-thread action therefore demonstrates Trump’s resolution to get a grip on, and perhaps even to patch up, the political problems he had inherited. The next time he holds the gesture (11’29) it accompanies the claim that his own administration is running like a ‘fine-tuned machine’, thereby demonstrating the gesture’s ‘precision-grip’ credentials.

Adam Kendon makes the point that precision-grip gestures go beyond mere preciseness of grip to imply preciseness of process, and specifically a process of making: ‘the semantic theme that they share is related to ideas of exactness, making something precise, or making prominent some specific fact or idea’.<sup>52</sup> On the word ‘mess’, Trump moved from his small circling to a new gesture by flicking up his index finger to make an upwards pointing pistol pose with the thumb tucked against the forward-facing palm and behind the middle finger. A variation of this is to flick out the thumb at the same time as flicking up the index finger in order to make an upwards pointing L-shape pistol hand. Mary

<sup>50</sup> Michael Lempert, ‘Barack Obama, Being Sharp: Indexical Order in the Pragmatics of Precision-Grip Gesture’ (2011) 11(3) *Gesture* 241–270, 246.

<sup>51</sup> Donald Trump, First Presidential Press Conference (16 February 2017).

<sup>52</sup> Adam Kendon, *Gesture: Visible Action as Utterance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 240.



Civiello notices that Trump often emphasizes the precision of the point he is making by moving immediately from the small cirlet to the L-shape pistol.<sup>53</sup> In Trump's gestural performance, the right to bear arms carries a new meaning.

Barack Obama's favoured precision gesture is a compound of Trump's small cirlet and Trump's upwards pointing pistol finger. Obama makes an index-finger-touching-thumb ring as in Trump's small cirlet, albeit somewhat more pinched,<sup>54</sup> but in Obama's case the other digits are flexed inwards to touch the palm. Whereas Trump, with fingers splayed, appears to be gripping a needle, Obama appears to be gripping a pen. Trump has a great many go-to gestures, including an index finger pointed directly towards his audience (this is a version of the 'pistol hand' that he used in *The Apprentice* when firing competitors), but the small cirlet is his signature manual action. The challenge is to discern its meaning. It is plausible, as I've just argued, to regard it as a stitching gesture, but of course I am biased by my project to make sense of it through the Making Sense. That's the thing about gestures: they are extremely susceptible to the interpretations we bring to them. The co-productive participation of the viewer or reader of a gesture is fundamental to making it mean something. One of the merits of reading the small cirlet as emblematic of the making process of sewing is that it is a natural extension of the basic gestural sign of getting a precise grip, and specifically of getting a grip for a productive purpose. Trump's two key gestures – the needle-holding, thread-pulling, 'small cirlet', and the pizza-kneading, thread-combing, 'large circle' – together present a president who is always crafting something, always manipulating. If he isn't stitching something up, he's cooking something up.

### Trump as Mime and Mimic

Mime artists have always exploited familiar everyday activities in order to produce sympathetic associations in their spectators. In *Modern Times* (dir. Chaplin, 1936), Charlie Chaplin performs a classic pantomime scene in a café involving such quotidian actions as opening a car door and engaging in romantic flirtation. In *Les Enfants du Paradis* (dir. Carné, 1945), the mime Jean-Louis Barrault in the role of Jean-Gaspard 'Baptiste' Debureau (the creator of Pierrot and father of modern French mime) rendered a sublime pickpocket scene incorporating such familiar daily acts as checking a pocket watch. The celebrated mime Marcel Marceau, who refined his craft as a member of Jean-Louis Barrault's company, made a high art of such commonplace actions as walking against the wind.

<sup>53</sup> 'What Donald Trump's Hand Gestures Say about Him', *BBC News*, 17 August 2016.

<sup>54</sup> Michael Lempert, 'Barack Obama, Being Sharp: Indexical Order in the Pragmatics of Precision-Grip Gesture' (2011) 11(3) *Gesture* 241–270, 247.



Trump's particular penchant is for mimicking opponents by caricaturing aspects of their character or physical attributes, which is acting in the impersonation mode discussed in Chapter 6. Trump's most infamous impersonation was a mocking representation of reporter Serge Kovaleski. What made it infamous is that Trump's positioning of his hands was interpreted by many to be a deliberate parody of Mr Kovaleski's hands, which are affected by a congenital joint condition. Whatever the truth of that interpretation, there is no doubt that Trump's wild, flailing gestures on that occasion were undignified and unbecoming of a US president. He probably hasn't read Quintilian, who warned that whereas 'a somewhat more agitated style of Delivery is regarded as acceptable, and is indeed appropriate in some contexts', it 'needs to be under control, lest, in our eagerness to pursue the elegance of the performer, we lose the authority of the good and grave man'.<sup>55</sup> Trump was on safer ground when he employed the mime of reading a script to mock Hillary Clinton and the mime of falling asleep to lampoon Jeb Bush.<sup>56</sup> What's especially striking about his decision to ridicule Clinton as a script-reader is that this mocks an attribute that in a politician might be considered a reassuring sign of rigour and devotion to detail, but which in a theatrical or television performer comes across as unprofessional, unprepared, and damaging to the credibility of their performance. Trump is judging her, and encouraging his audience to judge her, by the standards of the actor's craft rather than by the standards of statecraft. Purists might say that Trump's set-piece impersonations aren't true mimes because they are accompanied by speaking, but Trump's distinctively disjointed and jumbled speech patterns become a sort of background noise that caption the mime just enough to give it context without distracting the spectator's attention from the spectacle of his gestural performance. They might be compared to the barely decipherable mumblings uttered by Rowan Atkinson's 'Mr Bean' character as he engages in his comedic gestural escapades. Indeed, this may be one of the unintended effects of Trump's rambling sentence structure – that it liberates his spectators to judge him more by his actions than by his words, and licences him to blame offensive words on innocent acting or to excuse offensive acting with innocuous words.

Late in 2016, I recommended to my students of rhetoric and advocacy that they should watch the US presidential debates with the sound turned off and assess for themselves which speaker – Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton – had the greatest gestural and performative appeal. The suggestion arose from my own accidental experience of watching a news report of the televised 'town hall'-style Second Presidential Debate (10 October 2016) with the sound

<sup>55</sup> Quintilian, *The Orator's Education (Institutio Oratoria)*, Donald A. Russell (ed. and trans.), Loeb Classical Library 124 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001) 11.3.184.

<sup>56</sup> Kira Hall, Donna M. Goldstein, and Matthew Bruce Ingram, 'The Hands of Donald Trump: Entertainment, Gesture, Spectacle' (2016) 6(2) *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 71–100, 84

turned off. As I watched, it struck me that Hillary Clinton's performance seemed rather rigid and repetitive, with lots of chopping hand gestures and a generally constricted and awkward comportment. Her use of the stage space was also static and constricted. This is ideal in a lawyer in a courtroom and perhaps commendable if one is trying to communicate political stability, but Clinton's fixed status as part of the nation's political furniture was one of Trump's main points of attack against her. His mobility across the stage signalled that he was bringing a new movement and disruption to the settled state of things. It is true that at one point in the debate he seemed to stalk Clinton as he followed her from behind, which came across as somewhat predatory behaviour (a *Saturday Night Live* parody accompanied it with the famous threat music from the movie *Jaws*), but in brute performative terms it does no harm for a populist to present himself as being at the top of the political food chain in contrast to the immobility of a career politician and member of the Washington establishment (the same *Saturday Night Live* picked up on Clinton's somewhat robotic movements and general lack of gestural ease). Trump's mobility across the stage might have made him look like a shark, but in contrast Clinton's incessant paddling on the spot made her look like a lame duck stuck in what Trump calls 'the swamp' of the political establishment. The *New York Times* published a video summary of the second debate with the title 'Trump's Looming Onstage Presence in Presidential Debate'.<sup>57</sup> Jim Rutenberg's commentary accompanying that video provides an excellent summary of the candidates' contrasting styles:

I think what we saw in this debate that we didn't see in the last debate was Donald Trump's comfort in front of a camera, his ability to command the stage. However, it was a looming presence: looming behind her, pacing around her . . . the huge risk is that that will be seen as not only disrespectful, but patently aggressive. His back was so up against a wall, that he went to what he knows best in sort of the reality TV showman. He did own the medium tonight, and that's not to say Hillary Clinton didn't. She was composed, she kept to her mark, as they call it, on the stage. She wandered when she had to, but it was in the practiced way a politician does it. Donald Trump's career has been lived on television. Hillary Clinton's career has been lived in the halls of Congress, in the White House, and tonight you really saw that.

Clinton's gestures were seldom smooth but tended rather to punctuate and beat out her words in the percussive manner that is known as a 'baton' gesture. Lacking gestural variety and interest, the cumulative effect can give the viewer the sense that they are being beaten down by the repeated hammering home of points. In this respect, Clinton's gestures were as aggressive as Trump's, only in a different way. Arguably, and counter-intuitively, they might even have

<sup>57</sup> Jim Rutenberg, 'Trump's Looming Onstage Presence in Presidential Debate', *New York Times*, 10 October 2016.

been more stereotypically masculine than his. It could be that Trump's freely flowing hands, smooth stage-gliding, and even his soft-edged hairstyle are actually more typically female in their register than Clinton's more tightly sculpted hair, erect posture, deliberate gait, and chopping hands. Linguists examining the performance of candidates in the presidential primaries concluded that the femininity of Donald Trump's voice was second only to Hillary Clinton's and that, when placed alongside such nonverbal cues as gestures and facial expressions, he was the most feminine of all the candidates.<sup>58</sup> Haley Freeman, a journalist for *The Guardian* newspaper, wrote a piece entitled 'Imagine if Donald Trump Were a Woman: You Simply Can't';<sup>59</sup> but an experiment in political performance at New York University has successfully imagined precisely that. Maria Guadalupe, an associate professor of economics and political science, worked with Joe Salvatore, an associate professor of educational theatre, to commission an actress to play Trump, 'replicating his words, gestures, body language, and tone verbatim', while a male actor did the same in the role of Clinton.<sup>60</sup> Guadalupe and Salvatore found in rehearsal that their own preconceptions were challenged, leading them to ask what the male Clinton (actor Jonathan Gordon) was 'smiling about all the time', and did he not 'seem a little stiff, tethered to rehearsed statements at the podium', while the female Trump (actress Brenda King) was 'plainspoken and confident' and 'freely roamed the stage?'<sup>61</sup> In performances of their show, *Her Opponent*, audiences 'were shocked to find that they couldn't seem to find in Jonathan Gordon what they had admired in Hillary Clinton – or that Brenda King's clever tactics seemed to shine in moments where they'd remembered Donald Trump flailing or lashing out'.<sup>62</sup>

The authors of 'The Hands of Donald Trump' note 'how Trump elevates his entertainment value by crafting comedic representations of his political opponents as well as himself'.<sup>63</sup> These crafted representations 'involve the dramaturgical replaying of an actual or imagined event, action, or behavior', often by impersonation ('assuming another's alleged subjectivity'). The authors add that '[t]hese representations take the form of a kind of embodied performance' which include what gesture scholars call 'bodily quoting',<sup>64</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Claire Cain Miller, 'Measuring Trump's Language' *New York Times*, 14 March 2016, quoting Robin Lakoff, professor emerita of linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>59</sup> Haley Freeman, 'Imagine if Donald Trump Were a Woman: You Simply Can't', *The Guardian*, 27 September 2016.

<sup>60</sup> Eileen Reynolds, 'What if Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton Had Swapped Genders?', NYU website, 28 February 2017. I am grateful to Sean Mulcahy for bringing this to my attention.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. <sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Kira Hall, Donna M. Goldstein, and Matthew Bruce Ingram, 'The Hands of Donald Trump: Entertainment, Gesture, Spectacle' (2016) 6(2) *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 71–100, 73.

<sup>64</sup> Leelo Keevallik, 'Bodily Quoting in Dance Correction' (2010) 43(4) *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 401–426.

'transmodal stylizations',<sup>65</sup> 'full body enactments',<sup>66</sup> 'gestural reenactments',<sup>67</sup> and 'pantomime'.<sup>68</sup> The last of these – 'pantomime' – is especially pertinent to their analysis of Trump as comedic performer, because pantomime is a highly crafted and conventional art form. It is unlikely that Trump has studied the art form and consciously crafted his performances in keeping with its conventions, which compels the conclusion that he is an accidental mime. He is not obeying the tenets of comedic pantomime but has stripped it back to its ancient origins in human, even animal, gesture. There is also, though, a sense in which Trump might be said to have internalized a general appreciation for the extensive and deep-rooted culture of 'knock-about' comedy. The various tributaries of this culture – *commedia dell'arte*, 'Punch and Judy' shows, modern French mime, silent movie slapstick, and circus clowning – can be traced back to ancient sources, including the visceral and lascivious Graeco-Roman mime and the somewhat more refined arts of the *pantomimus* that was popular in Augustan Rome.

Whereas Roman mime is said to have sometimes involved actual sexual and homicidal acts, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* describes the *pantomimus* as a 'nonspeaking dancer in the Roman theatre who performed dramatic scenes, acting all the characters in a story in succession using only masks, body movement, and rhythmic gestures'. *Commedia dell'arte* developed on the more refined side, whereas Punch and Judy puppet shows emphasize the brutal. Pulcinella, a stock character of the *commedia*, was Anglicized as Punchinello ('Punch') sometime after certain Italians, probably Neapolitans, brought him to England. Samuel Pepys' diary dates the first recorded performance in England to 9 May 1662 in London's Covent Garden, where he saw 'an Italian puppet play that is within the rayles there, which is very pretty, the best that ever I saw'. When Punch and Judy became especially popular with children on their seaside summer holidays, Punch's mistress (a vestige of the Roman penchant for sexual mime) lost her place in the puppet line-up, but even as a children's show the spectacle generally retains scenes of baby beating, wife beating, evasion of police, hanging, and even a crocodile attack that wouldn't be out of place in the Roman circus. There are echoes of the Punch and Judy show in Donald Trump's remarkable ability to evade the legal consequences of alleged sexual and financial impropriety. Even the Devil, who eventually comes for Punch, is outsmarted by the slippery protagonist.

<sup>65</sup> Marjorie Harness Goodwin and H. Samy Alim, "'Whatever (Neck Roll, Eye Roll, Teeth Suck)": The Situated Coproduction of Social Categories and Identities through Stancetaking and Transmodal Stylization' (2010) 20(1) *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 179–194.

<sup>66</sup> Irene Mittelberg, 'Balancing Acts: Image Schemas and Force Dynamics as Experiential Essence in Pictures by Paul Klee and Their Gestural Enactments', in B. Dancygier et al. (eds), *Language and the Creative Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

<sup>67</sup> Jack Sidnell, 'Coordinating Gesture, Talk, and Gaze in Reenactments' (2006) 39(4) *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 377–409.

<sup>68</sup> Jürgen Streeck, 'Depicting by Gesture' (2008) 8(3) *Gesture* 285–301.

'The Donald' has his own devils, including his Democrat opponents, and although they have impeached him twice and sought to have him removed from office almost from the moment that he became president, at the time of writing they have yet to drag him down. A similar dynamic can be observed in Bill Clinton's impressive Punch-like success in slipping substantially unscathed from the noose of impeachment. James L. Mast puts this down to Clinton's theatrical appeal in contrast to that of his adversary, Newt Gingrich, noting that '[i]n drama, a villain can be the star if he is more attractive than the other characters'.<sup>69</sup>

### Trump in the Tradition of the *Commedia Dell'arte*

Trump's performance does not fit squarely with any one of the stock characters of the *commedia dell'arte*, but he displays characteristics of several of them. Being a privileged member of America's financial elite, and at the same time a populist with special appeal to grassroots labourers, from farmers to truckers, he reflects the duality of Pulcinella whom Ducharte summarizes as a conjuncture of higher and lower social status: 'The "upper" Pulcinella is intelligent, sensual, sly, keen . . . The "lower" Pulcinella is a dull and course bumpkin.'<sup>70</sup> Trump also displays attributes of other stock characters of the *commedia*. Like Il Capitano, Trump is a ridiculously hyperbolic braggart who shows off his virility with boasts of sexual prowess, and, like the *commedia* mask (character) called 'Il Dottore', Trump pretends to have expertise in a great many subjects of which he is in fact quite ignorant. Trump even thinks he deserves a Nobel Prize for 'a lot of things'<sup>71</sup> – a claim made in a joint press conference with Imran Khan, prime minister of Pakistan, who on that occasion seemed to be thoroughly enjoying Trump's larger-than-life comedic turn. One of the great many reasons why 'Il Dottore' Trump didn't win the Nobel Prize in chemistry or medicine was his notorious speculation that Covid-19 might be cured by somehow injecting disinfectant into the human bloodstream. More probably, he had his sights set on the Nobel Peace Prize, to judge from the offer made (in the press conference just mentioned) to mediate between Khan and Prime Minister Modi of India if they should ever need his help. The offer was accompanied by the boast, 'I've never failed as an arbitrator'. How reminiscent this is of Ducharte's recollection that Il Dottore 'undertook one day to use his vast learning in an affair that did not concern him in the least'.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>69</sup> James L. Mast, *The Performative Presidency: Crisis and Resurrection during the Clinton Years* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) 198.

<sup>70</sup> Pierre Louis Ducharte, *The Italian Comedy* (1929) (New York: Dover Publications 1966) 212.

<sup>71</sup> 'Donald Trump Complains He Deserves a Nobel Prize: "They Gave One to Obama"', *Guardian News*, 24 September 2019.

<sup>72</sup> Pierre Louis Ducharte, *The Italian Comedy* (1929) (New York: Dover Publications 1966) 196.

Another stock character of the *commedia* with whom Trump's performance has more than a passing resemblance is the Venetian Magnifico (high status man) 'Pantalone'. Literary scholar Allardyce Nicoll suggests that if we were to seek Pantalone's 'present-day counterpart':

[W]e should not be far wrong in thinking of a middle-aged businessman, wealthy and well esteemed, apt at times to dally with ladies of doubtful virtue, at other times apt to show himself the devoted father anxious to protect a young son or puzzled by the actions of a daughter he does not understand.<sup>73</sup>

Nicoll adds that Pantalone 'can prove himself stingy, avaricious and credulous on occasion'.<sup>74</sup> These attributes chime with the self-styled 'billionaire' Donald Trump and his insistence that Mexico is 'going to pay for the wall', which he promised to build to keep illegal immigrants from entering the USA at its southern border.<sup>75</sup> Pantalone is mature of years but more virile than senile. He is energetic and athletic, with his comedy residing in large part in the fact that for a middle-aged Magnifico who ought to be a sober man of affairs, he is ridiculously lustful, passionate, and excitable. Another point of resemblance is Trump's partnership with his vice-president, Mike Pence, which parallels the classic master–servant pairing that runs through the *commedia* and is exemplified by the Venetian merchant Pantalone and his Bergamask servant Zanni. In their relatively rare joint performances, Pence is typically to be seen deferring obsequiously to his master. In one video interview on Trump's private jet, Pence simply smiled and nodded silently while his Pantalone pontificated at length.<sup>76</sup>

### Other Populist 'Presidents': Blair and Macron

Trump is not the first vainglorious and vaguely comedic politician to have played the populist card in recent years. In the UK, the first modern paradigm was Prime Minister Tony Blair (1997–2007). A wannabe rock star,<sup>77</sup> he never missed a chance to sprinkle himself with celebrity stardust imported from the USA. It was on Blair's watch that the UK's highest court of law – the Judicial Committee of the House of Lords – was rebranded in American style as the 'Supreme Court of the United Kingdom'. Blair's party also rebranded the

<sup>73</sup> Allardyce Nicoll, *The World of Harlequin, a Critical Study of the Commedia Dell'arte* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963) 52.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>75</sup> 'Donald Trump and Mike Pence Sit Down with David Muir', *ABC News*, 7 September 2016; Linda Qiu, 'The Many Ways Trump Has Said Mexico Will Pay for the Wall', *New York Times*, 11 January 2019.

<sup>76</sup> 'Donald Trump and Mike Pence Sit Down with David Muir', *ABC News*, 7 September 2016, 5'26–6'40.

<sup>77</sup> See the satirical documentary *Tony Blair Rock Star* (dir. Bruce Goodison and Alison Jackson, 2006) (<https://vimeo.com/50781150>) that depicts Blair's attempts to become a rock star while at university.

Labour Party as 'New Labour' and did its best to rebrand Blair and traditional cabinet government along more presidential lines. I personally saw Blair once when he visited the University of Warwick for a summit with US President Bill Clinton. I was standing outside in a small crowd of university staff and assorted spectators as we watched Clinton's motorcade glide past. Sitting in the shade of his limousine and wearing a dark suit behind tinted windows, only Clinton's vague silhouette was visible and the white cuff of his shirt sleeve as it conferred a regal wave on the assembled onlookers. Blair put on a very different performance. He leapt out of his limo, grinning manically and waving excitedly in all directions with his waving hand held high in the air. As he waved in the direction of my section of the crowd, he seemed to be looking above our heads as if acknowledging a much larger crowd arrayed in a grandstand of well-wishers. I distinctly remember turning around and thinking 'who is he waving at?' There was nobody there. To this spectator on the ground, Blair looked both deluded and foolish in that moment, but to quote Polonius in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, 'Though this be madness, yet there is method in't' (2.2.202–203). What I'd just witnessed was entirely for the benefit of the television audience that would later tune into news coverage of the event. They would see Tony Blair acknowledging a mass gathering. It was a Trumpian move straight from the populist propaganda playbook. (For a more recent example, witness Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau waving as he stepped out of his plane on arrival at the 2021 G7 summit in the UK – were there really public crowds there to greet him in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic?)

French President Emanuel Macron has adopted Blair's populist tactic of positioning his politics outside of traditional party lines. I have in mind Peter Mair's definition of populism as 'a means of linking an increasingly undifferentiated and depoliticized electorate with a largely neutral and non-partisan system of governance'.<sup>78</sup> Like Blair, Macron comes across as a vainglorious political weathervane. Not welded to established party doctrine or respect for tradition, he seems to spin for a vote whichever way the wind blows. In 2016, Macron established a new political party, or movement, with the amusingly non-committal and excitable name 'La République En Marche!' – complete with exclamation mark! It says something about the party's lack of roots and populist responsiveness that it was rebranded in May 2022 as 'Renaissance', despite being founded under its former name as recently as 2016. The highly animated, personality-driven politics of characters like Trump, Blair, and Macron can be charismatic and attractive, but loose cannons are dangerous. In the case of Trump, Blair, and Macron, their instinct to goad the popular will and lackey the populist tide has arguably cost lives, albeit indirectly. In Trump's case the movement utterly lost control when his supporters stormed

<sup>78</sup> Peter Mair, 'Populist Democracy vs Party Democracy', in Y. Mény and Y. Surel (eds), *Democracies and the Populist Challenge* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002) 81–98, 84.



the Capitol Building on 6 January 2021, resulting in fatalities. In Blair's case, his instinct to follow like a tributary wherever the fount of US foreign policy flowed, led him on a flimsy premise to send UK forces to join the USA in the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The official inquiry into the basis for that invasion was critical of Blair's bluster, including the legalese spin that the former lawyer put on the dossier of evidence presented to the House of Commons in September 2002. Blair had incorrectly summarized it as establishing 'beyond doubt' that Saddam Hussein's regime was in possession of weapons of mass destruction. In Macron's case, he made the dangerous mistake of playing politics at a critical stage in his country's response to the Covid-19 pandemic in 2021 by groundlessly describing the UK-developed AstraZeneca vaccine as 'quasi-ineffective' in older people.<sup>79</sup> A staunch supporter of the EU and vociferous opponent of Brexit, Macron has also been accused of shoring up his domestic standing by pushing the EU to adopt a hard line against the UK in Brexit trade negotiations. In response, certain unnamed UK sources were reported to have labelled talks with the EU as 'performance art'.<sup>80</sup> Boris Johnson responded by walking away from the talks, but six days later the talks resumed. On that occasion it was reported that '[t]he theatrics of Boris Johnson's walkout lasted less than a week', and '[t]he pantomime is over and now the serious work begins in the UK-EU trade negotiations'.<sup>81</sup> All politicians put on a show to seek popularity, but danger attends popularity that is pursued at the cost of principle. Trump, Blair, and Macron were acting presidents who were applauded into power by popular approval. (We can add Johnson and Trudeau to the list if we include leaders more firmly grounded in the traditions of an established political party.) An acting president's moment centre stage is brief. Whether the performance stands the test of time is judged ultimately not by the quality of the acting but by the fruits of their actions.

<sup>79</sup> Discussed in Chapter 11 on the topic of fake news.

<sup>80</sup> Edward Malnick, 'Macron "Using Brexit Talks to Boost Standing in France"', *The Telegraph*, 17 October 2020.

<sup>81</sup> James Crisp, 'The Week of Pantomime-Like Negotiations That Brought Britain Back to the Brexit Negotiating Table', *The Telegraph*, 24 October 2020.