



# Paul Slabolepszy's angst-ridden Elvis<sup>1</sup>

Marietjie van Deventer  
Department of Communication Sciences  
Technikon Free State  
BLOEMFONTEIN  
E-mail: mvdvente@mail.tofs.ac.za

## Abstract

### Paul Slabolepszy's angst-ridden Elvis

*Paul Slabolepszy is a popular South African playwright whose plays are enjoyed by diverse multi-cultural audiences in South Africa and all over the world. Slabolepszy's special appeal lies in his ability to reflect in his plays an authentic South African landscape with its stormy political background, diverse cultures and inhabitants, and to evoke empathy for all of his characters within this South African milieu through a variety of comic techniques. The play, *The Return of Elvis du Pisanie*, first performed 10 years after Slabolepszy's breakthrough play, *Saturday Night at the Palace* (1985), is apolitical and focuses on the plight of a white South African male. This popular play's appeal is universal for Slabolepszy throughout evokes empathy by comically reviving with superb conviction the nostalgia of the Elvis-era, which most people are able to understand and even identify with. Through humour which is comic, sensitive and insightful, he is able to evoke empathy for his angst-ridden main character, the typical "bloke-next-door". His combination of a surreal dimension with comic humour and pathos is able to make us laugh and even wipe away a tear. In this way he also intensifies our feelings of empathy for his believable and identifiable protagonist, as he takes us on a nostalgic journey through the fifties to the present, with the legendary Elvis Presley functioning as the binding force.*

---

1 This article is based on a section of a Ph.D thesis (see Van Deventer, 1999).

## 1. Introduction

*The Return of Elvis du Pisanie* is the last play in Slabolepszy's collection of works, *Mooi Street and other Moves* (1994), and Slabolepszy without doubt ends the collection on a very high note. Of all Slabolepszy's plays to date, this one-man show or monologue has received more awards than any other play in the history of South African theatre (Dickson, 1993:8) and also seems to have been one of the most popular plays with South African theatre audiences.

The play is also known internationally, and Slabolepszy by invitation performed it in the United States of America (Slabolepszy, 1994:300). Slabolepszy himself commented on the universal appeal of *The Return of Elvis du Pisanie* after the play's reception in Chicago when he stated: "America gave Elvis to the world and now he comes back via the mouths of foreigners. They understood the character completely" (Van Rooyen, 1993:3).

The tremendous impact of *The Return of Elvis du Pisanie* seems to lie in its overall entertainment value, its escapism in the form of laughter, its examination of Eddie's past through *déjà-vu* by which Eddie is able to revive himself, and its lesson about the therapeutic value of dreams or fantasy. In the play Slabolepszy paints a humorous picture of a recognisable and believable individual with whom we are able to identify, whose pain we are able to share and who evokes empathy. However, Eddie's *angst* is not that of a tragic hero, for Slabolepszy makes Eddie's suffering more realistic and palatable through humour.

Eddie (Elvis) du Pisanie could be regarded as a reincarnation of Greg in the sketch *Abnormal Load* of an earlier work, *Travelling Shots* (1988). (Slabolepszy himself admits that there are strong resemblances between the two characters – they have both lost their jobs and have suicidal tendencies). However, Elvis du Pisanie is a fully-fledged character who does not hover on the periphery of the stereotypical, white Afrikaner, as does Greg.

In addition, as Rutter (1992:4) points out in *The Cape Times*, Elvis du Pisanie is "so human that anybody, regardless of race, class or nationality" can relate to him. Although Elvis du Pisanie is an essentially South African character who encounters problems familiar to white South African males, his appeal is universal and not limited to a single South African culture. Elvis Presley is the binding force in the play who, although having passed away, is known and adored by multitudes of fans all over the world. Slabolepszy elaborates on this world-wide adulation when he says:

The touchstone here is Elvis. There's something kitsch about him, something middle-world. He connects with a section of every country. The pilgrims of Graceland all look the same, there's a uniformity about them, a kind of mental attitude they share. There is a type of music to each time and place and Elvis is a common denominator to so many people (Elahi, 1992:23).

Eddie also experiences universal emotions such as his sense of loss and hopelessness, for which the only outcome seems to be suicide, also a universal issue. The fact that Eddie is the typical "bloke-next-door" (Slabolepszy, 1994:301), the ordinary guy with whom most people are able to identify and empathise, further reinforces the impact and universal appeal of the play. Marais (1992:10) sums up this universal nature of *The Return of Elvis du Pisanie* as follows:

Paul Slabolepszy's brilliant one-man show is compelling because he addresses thoughts and feelings that everyone recognises in themselves – we all experience feelings of failure at some stage of our lives – His recollections of his childhood, movies, characters and an era are universal, and there is always something with which to identify.

Eddie is able to recall the good times in his life with humour, which makes him comparable with ordinary human beings. Slabolepszy depicts Eddie's suffering and his happiness as part of life's inevitable cycle. This depiction of Eddie reinforces our perception of comedy's being able to purge through laughter. It also demonstrates that when one is able to laugh at oneself and one's life, despite hardship, one emerges as a more mature individual; one is also able to cleanse oneself and get on with one's life.

In *The Return of Elvis du Pisanie* Slabolepszy also indicates the proximity of laughter and tears, for there is nothing in life which cannot be both comic and sad. Even though we are able to laugh at Eddie from time to time, our laughter is that of recognition and not derisive, a sharing of feeling, by which Slabolepszy is able to evoke empathy for Eddie. This reminds one of comedy's tragic alter ego and Byron's words that "... if I laugh at any mortal thing, 'Tis that I may not weep" (quoted in Bentley, 1966:299).

## 2. Aim and focus

I wish to shed light on Slabolepszy's craftsmanship and the extent to which he has been able to make involvement possible in *The Return of Elvis du Pisanie* and realise the potential of comic technique. In this particular play my focus is on his combination of comic/tragic elements to

evoke empathy for his Elvis character with whom we are able to identify through our laughter of recognition. This will be done by means of a close contextual analysis of specific passages from *The Return of Elvis du Pisanie*, and other relevant discussion, in relation to the play as a whole.

### 3. A familiar landscape intertwined with a universal character

Edward Cedric du Pisanie's references to how Elvis Presley has appeared to people after his death in familiar South African landmarks, make the play amusing and local in character. These "encounters" also point to the universality of the Elvis myth, by which thousands of Elvis fans swear and which is illustrative of the human capacity for self-deception.

By combining the local and the universal, Slabolepszy extends the play's appeal to include a universal humanity, a view which Rutter (1992:4) reinforces when she says "the universal nature of the script, which while being firmly rooted in an indigenous setting, still manages to transcend geographical confines and ascend to ecumenical heights".

### 4. Laughter and tears

Bentley (1966:302) comments on the indirect, ironic quality of comedy which says "fun" when it actually means "misery" and maintains that when comedy reveals this misery, "it is able to transcend it in joy". Another truism about comedy is uttered by Goethe's Mephisto when he explains to God that "one cannot understand man unless one is able to laugh" (Goethe quoted in MacHovec, 1988:183). A close reading of *The Return of Elvis du Pisanie* reveals Slabolepszy's ability to capture this ambivalence of laughter and tears inherent in comedy, while evoking empathy and understanding for his main character in the process.

For example, it appears that Eddie has returned to the exact spot where he had been thirty years before because of what he believes was an encounter with Elvis. Eddie expects another "reappearance" in order to get some answers from the "King" himself. Slowly Eddie relates how he would have committed suicide this same night if it had not been for the "interference" of Elvis. Eddie namely relates how he heard Elvis singing over the car radio "Is your heart filled with pain ...? Shall I come back

again ...?" (p. 310) as he (Eddie) wanted to gas himself in the car.<sup>2</sup> While Slabolepszy succeeds in evoking laughter at Eddie's preposterous notions about his direct communication line with Elvis, we are so drawn into his sadness and his genuine conviction about Elvis, that we are simultaneously also able to empathise with him.

In due course Eddie tells his own heart-rending story of how he, while lying in his bed, had been led by some premonition thirty years before and had returned to this same lamppost expecting an encounter with Elvis. Elvis had not appeared that night, but by some inexplicable coincidence, Eddie had missed being slaughtered by his unbalanced father, who had that same night committed suicide after having killed off the rest of the family. While one is able to identify with Eddie's pain, his child-like adulation of Elvis, his sincere belief that it is Elvis himself who has interfered in his life, and his almost petulant insistence that the "King" owes him an explanation, are also very comic.

Kerr (1968:333) refers to man's essential pathos and indicates that it is the function of comedy to deal with this pathos, even though it may be at the expense of its own identity. This picture of man's "essential pathos" is reaffirmed by Bentley's words in "Tragedy in Modern Dress" on "the Christian democratic assumption that merely to be a man is a tragic fact" and his reference to "the tragedy of modern life" (Bentley, 1967:25). Consider how Slabolepszy deals with Eddie's pathos in the following example, when Eddie conducts a conversation with the imaginary Elvis via the words of the well-known Elvis song. Before the audience can become too carried away by the pathos and tragedy of the Eddie character, the way in which Eddie rationalises is sure to evoke laughter:

Is my heart filled with pain ...! [*Looking up angrily*] Of course it's filled with pain ...? Why you think I'm doing this ...? For fun ... !? 'Shall I come back again ...?' I dunno. Where were you the last time I came to this spot, thirty years ago – and waited and waited and waited ...!?  
(p. 310).

It is clear from this example that Slabolepszy makes fun of Eddie in a gentle, subtle manner. It is through this kind of comic subtlety that we are able to identify with Eddie and Slabolepszy is able to evoke empathy for him.

---

2 Page numbers without an indication of the source, refer to Slabolepszy, P. 1994. *The Return of Elvis du Pisanie*. In: Slabolepszy, P. *Mooi Street and other Moves*. Johannesburg : Witwatersrand University Press. p. 298-334.

## 5. Tragi-comedy

Kerr (1968:28) indicates that there "is no act in life that is not, when it is seen whole, both comic and tragic at once" and refers to comedy's disturbing tragic impulse as "comedy's indispensable alter ego" (Kerr, 1968:213). Bentley argues in the same vein in "Tragedy and Comedy: Some Generalizations" and emphasises that the "comic sense tries to cope with the daily, hourly, inescapable difficulty of being" (Bentley, 1966:306). Similarly Freud also admits that humour is one of the many methods man has devised in order to escape his compulsion for suffering (quoted in McFadden, 1982:148).

This comic-tragic sense of comedy elucidated in the above, is exemplified in *The Return of Elvis du Pisanie*. For example, before reaching the moving climax of Eddie's poignant tale, Slabolepszy narrates entertaining stories about Eddie, who was a teenager during the Elvis-era in the 1950s and early 1960s. In this way Slabolepszy prevents the play from becoming morbid, despite its sad, pathos-filled moments. Slabolepszy's acute sense of the comic, even in the play's sadder moments, prevents it from becoming outright tragedy.

### 5.1 The reflection in the mirror

One usually learns about the social history of a country when watching plays. In this respect Slabolepszy succeeds, for he reflects South African life as it is, in *The Return of Elvis du Pisanie*. Grobler (1993:5) describes Slabolepszy's plays as chronicles and adds that it is the familiarity of Slabolepszy's social and historical landscape that lures big audiences to witness those elements in his plays that are so genuinely South African, yet so difficult to describe; she pinpoints how these audiences are mesmerised by their familiar lives unfolding before them on stage – a process which Slabolepszy delicately balances with a humorous-satiric edge and the pain of recognition. This is especially true of *The Return of Elvis du Pisanie*. However, what makes the play even more appealing is that Slabolepszy does not so much "teach" his audience about South Africa, as bares the soul of the human psyche, for in Eddie one is able to recognise oneself, experiencing with him the same sense of joy, helplessness, desperation and isolation. In both this respect and the fact that Slabolepszy relates the social circumstances of this country, Slabolepszy's plays are non-elitist; as he himself maintains: "I don't see what I'm doing as elitist. I tell stories from the landscape. It's what I do best" (Elahi, 1992:23).

The emotional impact of *The Return of Elvis du Pisanie* is heightened by Slabolepszy's haunting image of the devouring insecurity that modern

man is prone to. However, in Slabolepszy's play there is hope, for it seems as though the catharsis of tragedy achieved through Eddie's intense suffering cleanses and revitalises, not only leaving Eddie with new hope for the future, but also transferring this sense of hope to us. Slabolepszy succeeds in giving his Eddie character an unforgettable existence of his own, creating an individual character with whom we can laugh, empathise and sympathise, in the process recognising our own anxiety, weaknesses and fears. Marais (1992:10) identifies this act of participation with Slabolepszy in *The Return of Elvis du Pisanie* as "an experience you live through with him". It is this type of involvement which Slabolepszy strives for in his plays, for he admits that "The whole point of telling a story on stage is that you connect with others. If you don't, then you have failed, you haven't told a story successfully" (Elahi, 1992:23).

Eddie believes that the "simple act of ... switching on a car radio" (p. 303) has changed the course of his life. Through this Slabolepszy makes fun of a specific form of self-deception that man is prone to by believing in supernatural, external forces that are able to control his life, and in the case of Eddie, it is Elvis Presley who speaks to Eddie from the grave. However, one cannot be patronising by condemning Eddie's immature, almost infantile notion of clutching at something as insubstantial as a message via a song over a car radio to give some meaning to his life – is this not a weakness that everyone is susceptible to in his lifetime and which points to man's almost primitive, psychological urge to survive in a hostile, uncompromising environment?

Consider the passage in which Eddie tells the audience with almost child-like excitement about his envisaged funeral. This reminds one of the darkly comic humour in *We Shall Sing for the Fatherland* (1990), in which Mda's two freedom-fighters return as spirits to watch over their own mean funeral, while Mr Mafutha's funeral is much smarter because of his accumulated wealth. Slabolepszy makes fun of the sensationalism surrounding a suicide and how people often attend such funerals out of morbid curiosity and because they don't want to miss anything, rather than out of respect for the dead. Mda's satiric humour is more scathing than Slabolepszy's, for he evokes empathy for the two ex-soldiers by exposing commitment which is betrayed and dreams which are shattered. On the other hand, Slabolepszy exposes how people often regard a funeral for somebody who has committed suicide as an "Event" (p. 303).

Through exaggeration, Slabolepszy implies that many people also regard funerals of this nature as an opportunity to be entertained, rather than to mourn. The notion of getting excited about one's own funeral, ["boy-oh-boy" (p. 303)] is so ridiculous and incongruous, that this in itself is able to

evoke laughter from the audience and indeed recalls Fielding's observation in his preface to *Joseph Andrews* (1742) that "life everywhere furnishes an accurate observer with the ridiculous" (Fielding, 1970:xviii). The fact that Eddie describes his funeral in such minute detail and that he truly believes that this is what it would be like at his funeral, even predicting the way in which people will react to his suicide, add to the comedy. By making fun of this typical middle-class South African ("AVBOB") funeral and by satirising typical reactions one would expect from funeral-goers, Slabolepszy is able to evoke laughter:

This pathetic little bunch, all gathering around my AVBOB discount coffin and sadly shaking their heads ... Hah! Father Vincent! Must be tough for you, hey, padre? No talk today of the Kingdom of Heaven, hey? You don't believe a man who takes his own life can ever join the Everlasting Party up there, do you? ... I don't believe it ...! Braithewaite!? You got a cheek! I gave twelve a' the best years a' my life, selling your shitty product, and you showed me the door ... Oh, come Bob – dry those tears, man. It's not me you crying for – it's the bum golfing partner you're losing – the guy you cheated a few bucks off every odd Saturday afternoon. [*To his 'wife'*] Eunice ... Eunice. Sweetheart, please – please try to understand that it's more than just ... these things don't just happen ... overnight ... (p. 303).

Eddie's funeral guests are totally plausible representatives of Eddie's world, even though they are amusing. In addition to our laughter at the circumstances of the above, there is an underlying tragic dimension to this type of comedy of laughing at something as tragic as the funeral of a would-be suicide victim. The way in which Eddie enacts his own funeral is both sad and funny, but our laughter is that of recognition. For example, we laugh because we recognise that we too, like Eddie, revert to self-pitying fantasies about death and our own funerals when we are sad. By making us laugh at ourselves, Slabolepszy to a large degree also enables us to deal with our own pain. Eddie's rendition of his own funeral is so human in its heartfelt simplicity, self-pity and bravado, that it simultaneously evokes laughter and draws empathetic understanding from us.

## 5.2 Comic relief

Slabolepszy breaks the gloom and hints of impending disaster in *The Return of Elvis du Pisanie* by bringing back memories of the "good old days". Teenagers who grew up in the fifties and sixties "rock" era would find Eddie's stories especially meaningful. For example, Eddie's imitation of a typical Saturday morning matinee is especially amusing: the African Mirror music in the background; an obnoxious gang of youngsters taking their seats; the predictability of the Dick Tracy serials where the hero



usually escapes death or some horrible disaster just in the nick of time, but which keeps dedicated fans in suspense until the next week's episode. Eddie who becomes the youngster sitting in the bioscope seat eagerly watching the Dick Tracy series while wolfing down his popcorn, adds to the humour. This amusing interlude prevents the play from becoming too tragic, considering Eddie's emotional turmoil.

Slabolepszy soon afterwards replaces the spotlight on Eddie as a grown man again, as though nothing has happened and as if what he has related were merely a mirror reflection of his thoughts; this device is very effective in heightening the contrast between the comic and the tragic. By so doing, Slabolepszy prevents the audience's attention from wavering and this dramatic technique is a gem in the hands of an experienced director and actor: "When the lights cross-fade to come up fully on him at the lamppost – it is as if he has not moved from the reflective pose he was in before the story began" (p. 306); it also demonstrates to what extent Slabolepszy has developed his own individual, but diverse style.

### 5.3 Eddie's *angst*: an extension of the tragic/comic dimension

Eddie confides that he is actually waiting for some kind of miracle to happen, for the chances of Elvis Presley's actually turning up in this exact spot where he stood thirty years before and which is more than two hundred kilometres from his present home, are unlikely. Eddie relates his personal *angst* at becoming redundant and losing his job. He shares with the audience his plight of how difficult it is for a man of forty-six to be re-employed, a reality that many ageing males in the same predicament who have also been excluded by the system are sure to be able to identify with. Slabolepszy admits to drawing on personal experience in *The Return of Elvis du Pisanie* (Elahi, 1992:23), which heightens the dramatic impact of the play and lends more credibility to the Eddie character.

Eddie relates how he planned his own suicide. Slabolepszy handles a subject which is actually supposed to be sad with so much subtlety, wit, honesty and finesse that one cannot fail to be amused. In this way Slabolepszy succeeds in providing momentary relief and in distancing one from the underlying tragedy of death by creating diversion in the form of laughter. For example, consider Eddie's contrition at his suicide note perhaps upsetting his children while they are watching their favourite TV cartoon, or his wife's not finding his body in the garage for more than three weeks, during which time his body most probably would have turned green. Eddie's concern about his family is both comic and touching. While we are laughing at the way in which Eddie worries about

trivialities, if we take into consideration that he is contemplating something as momentous as death, we simultaneously perceive Eddie's character as very human, and not the tragic figure we might expect him to be, as Slabolepszy shows us through Eddie's kind-heartedness and love of his family.

Likewise, the comic contrast between something as trivial as Eddie's trouble with the vomiting dog and its excitement at the misinterpreted prospect of a seaside holiday because of Eddie's midnight bustling on the night of his planned suicide; and Eddie's contemplation of the actual suicide itself, is able to evoke laughter. It is through his ability to invest his Eddie character with recognisable human qualities, with which we are able to identify, that Slabolepszy succeeds in evoking laughter and empathy for Eddie.

#### 5.4 Strengthening our empathy

Eddie's reflections about his caring, sensitive English mother who could never really adapt to the wild, harshness of Africa, the thunderstorms and the "Zulu Mine Dances" (p. 315) which made her think that the Zulus "were gearing up to avenge the Battle of Blood River" (p. 316) are also very touching. Nevertheless, the image of somebody's being afraid of something which actually happened more than one hundred years ago, is ludicrous and therefore able to evoke laughter (Slabolepszy hereby also seems to be satirising the white man's often unreasonable fear of the black South African). Eddie's memories of his soft-hearted mother also stand in stark contrast to her violent death at the hands of a mad, insensitive husband.

Eddie's feelings of guilt and the thought that he should have died on that fateful night with the rest of his family, and his inability to tell his wife and children that he is unable to go on, are touching and evoke empathy for individuals such as Eddie who through something as incomprehensible and violent as family murder, have been deprived the security of family life during their teenage years. These feelings of guilt and self-recrimination plague Eddie as a grown man, but every now and then Slabolepszy allows us a humorous glimpse of Eddie's suffering, strengthening our feelings of empathy for people such as Eddie:

Purpose to everything. Huh. 'There a purpose to everything ...'  
Bullshit ...! What was the purpose, Father Vincent ...? What was the purpose me coming to this lamppost that night – thirty years ago – if my whole life since has been such a stuff up? ... The way I look at it, there's bugger all purpose to anything ...! (p. 318).

The candid, amusing way in which Eddie's relates his suffering, including the swear words, does not make his sad circumstances morbid, and should evoke a humorous reaction.

Every now and then Eddie also interrupts the sadder part of his life story with amusing snippets of his younger days which conjure up nostalgic memories of a time long past. This flashback technique in *The Return of Elvis du Pisanie* proves not only humorous and entertaining – it also elucidates and helps one to visualise the society that Eddie belonged to and the people who shaped his life. This type of technique also heightens the tension of the play before it culminates in the shocking revelation about the family murder.

When Eddie continues the story about his father, we hear about his father's recurring "nightmares and freakouts" (p. 317). Eddie hints at his father's cruelty to his mother during those years. When he relates his father's reaction to his mother's reference to her husband's poor health; the following lines are darkly comic: "Not well? I'm not well ...? This coming from someone who dives under the kitchen table everytime a piss-will little thunderstorm comes along ...!" (p. 317).

Slabolepszy also admits that Eddie's story about Old Joseph and Oom Carel in Van Deventer Street in Witbank and the boat that they were building in their back yard for when the big rains came, is based on a true character during Slabolepszy's own Witbank days. Eddie concludes the comic/tragic tale about the two old men when he explains how the rains at last came for poor old Joseph and it rained for three days non-stop after a thunderstorm "the likes of which the Transvaal had never seen before or since" (p. 321); but at least old Joseph was at last at peace with the world, even though he died, ironically, in knee-deep water after a fatal heart attack. Slabolepszy continues in this comic/tragic vein when Eddie recalls how his father's condition worsened, how irritated his father had been with Oom Carel and Joseph (a coloured man) for building a boat with a cement bottom when there was not a sea in sight, and how they had been unable to do anything about their father's fits of rage. In the passage below Slabolepszy also launches a satirical attack on the racial prejudice of many white South Africans who share the same type of attitude as Eddie's father, and their chauvinistic attitude towards their wives:

He was liable to go off the handle at anything these days ... and rather than calm him down, those tranquilisers the doctor had given him for his nerves were making him even more ... gatvol. Gatvol with everyone and everything. A total ... pain to live with ... 'What's a bladdy Cape Coloured doing in the Transvaal? Bladdy coon must

bugger off to where he came from, man ...! [*Spinning round, viciously*] And you must keep your trap shut, Doris – or I send you back to England ...!' (p. 319).

Eddie relates how his troubled-filled life was given new meaning through the girl next door, Lydia Swanepoel, his childhood sweetheart, whose name is still engraved on the lamppost. Slabolepszy's humour is sensitive and insightful when he demonstrates what it is like when a fifteen-year-old boy falls in love for the first time. Eddie's story about how he was mesmerised by Lydia, making the mistake of trying to win her over by mentioning the name of Cliff Richard and not that of the "King", afterwards becoming obsessed with Elvis Presley and starting to imitate Elvis in everything he did, is particularly entertaining. It once again shows how finely attuned Slabolepszy's ear is to the comic and how he is able to demonstrate with precise accuracy the psyche of a young teenager during an era steeped in Presley mania. For example, Eddie's feelings for Lydia are accurately summed up as follows:

She was the first one who got me ... all shook up. In the chemical sense, that is. I didn't know much about chemistry at age fifteen, but – looking back – I know now it definitely musta' been ... chemical. I mean – I was already clocking into Heartbreak Hotel and we hadn't even said hello to each other – never mind goodbye! ... The crazy thing was, you know – she ... she wasn't even really much to write home about. In fact – to tell the truth – she looked more like a ... like a stick-insect than a chick. But what she had was this ... this pony-tail that sort of ... did things to your knees. Whenever she moved from one place to another – that pony-tail would sorta' – bob-flick – bob-flick – bob-flick – gwa-daannnggg ...! and you were gone. Sort of – hypnotised. Like a zombie (p. 322).

In the above passage Slabolepszy evokes laughter in various ways. For example, Eddie's painstaking explanation of how he was "shook up" is amusing, but very descriptive slang by which to explain the turmoil of emotions his first encounter with a girl had on him. His reference to "shook up" is also an allusion to the song made famous by Elvis, which lends credibility to the Eddie character living in the Elvis era. By adding in the "chemical sense", Eddie understates what he really means by being polite, but the audience are sure to grasp that what Eddie actually means is that the girl affected his hormones, or more plainly, she affected him in a sexual way. The fact that Eddie is so polite, and the way in which he refers to how she could have broken his heart as his "clocking into Heartbreak Hotel" (a reference to the familiar Elvis song), endear Eddie to us and make the way he must have felt as a love-sick teenager very real, recalling a familiar time in many readers' own lives.

In this humorous way Slabolepszy is able to evoke empathy for teenagers with similar experiences. Eddie's description of the girl's looks is also very witty and we are able to laugh at both her imperfections, ("like a stick-insect") compared with what Eddie regards as a "real" girl ("chick"), and the teenage jargon that Eddie uses by way of explanation. His explanation of how her ponytail (a trademark among teenage girls of the fifties/sixties generation) hypnotised him and made him senseless "[l]ike a zombie", is also both comic and descriptive.

Eddie's exaggerated rendition of how he became a "Man with a Mission" (p. 324) by emulating Elvis in everything he did and said, even after Lydia's pony-tail was "beginning to lose its charm – but now it was becoming a matter of pride" (p. 324), is likewise able to evoke much laughter. He recalls how the "War of the Airwaves" between him and his mother began in the household with her wanting to listen to "From Crystal with Love" on Springbok Radio and he to David Davies on LM Radio, where all the Elvis hit songs were broadcast.

Through Eddie's amusing stories about his Elvis obsession, Slabolepszy to a large degree also seems to be lulling his audience before his final showdown at the close of the play. It is especially comic when Eddie's father tells him to turn off Elvis's "bladdy crap" music and that they should "arrest that bastard for obscenity" (p. 324), and Eddie looks up the word "obscenity" in the dictionary. It is then that the light about Elvis at last dawns on him: "The pelvis. That's where it was. That was the secret. Get the pelvis going and I was half-way there" (p. 325). Thus a new life began for Eddie, which he relates to the audience in typical (white) South African teenage slang, which is responsible for much of our laughter in this passage:

Pretty soon, I was walking like Elvis. Talking like Elvis. It wasn't very long before the okes at school were even calling me Elvis. Elvis du Pisanie ... I With my collar sticking up and my kuif hanging down, I was gonna knock Lydia Swanepoel's stockings right off her feet. He was my Hero. I was closer to him than to anyone else ...! (p. 325).

Eddie's big break at last comes when he wins the third prize in an Elvis look-alike contest. Slabolepszy is extremely successful in conjuring up the excitement and near-hysteria of such an important occasion at Witbank. Eddie describes how all the teenagers and girls with their "starched dresses, alice bands and bobby sox" (p. 326) are there in full force, screaming and shouting because of the occasion celebrating their hero, Elvis. It is this humorous part of *The Return of Elvis du Pisanie* that determines much of its popularity at the box office, for the audience are entertained in true Slabolepszy fashion as he puts his character, Eddie,

caricature style, through his Elvis moves: "Last comb through my black boot-polish hair and I'm up onstage" (p. 327) not with the original song "Tutti Frutti", but "All Shook Up" (p. 327) because in this song there is "more vibrato" or trembling, which was "a pretty smart move" in case one "sorta" (p. 328) forgot one's words.

Slabolepszy paints a comic, but extremely vivid picture of the emotions of a teenager after the contest, with the dejected, young Eddie sitting all alone at the back of the hall with his third prize pink teddy bear. Nevertheless, our young "hero" at last tastes the victory of winning when Lydia comes to him, looks at him for the first time like a real person would and tells him that she thought he was the best Elvis there. Eddie gives Lydia the teddy-bear – "think of it as a gift from Elvis" (p. 330) – and the two young people hold hands for the first time. Although this is largely an exaggerated picture of first love, our laughter is not derisive, but that of recognition, by which we can think back with a smile to similar experiences in our own lives. In this way Slabolepszy is able to strengthen our feelings of empathy for his Eddie character.

- Tragic/comic contrast to reinforce empathy

*"As the lights go into cross-fade, EDDIE backs away to the lamppost" (p. 330) and through this Slabolepszy skilfully reverts back to the present situation before Eddie's reminiscences: "From the heart-warming memory of greatest triumph, he is thrown cruelly back to the harsh present" (p. 330). The contrast between the light-hearted comic approach in relating Eddie's past experiences, and the present reality which seems sadder, heightens the comic/tragic overtones of Eddie's plight. He is alone with his sadness, but is unable to articulate his sorrow. His despair is acute and there is tremendous pathos in his piteous cry about his family's terrible demise:*

I can't tell you what happened, Eunice. Where it all began. I can't even tell you, because I can't even tell it to myself. I've blocked it out. I've cut it from my mind, as sure as if I'd cut it with a knife. I'm ... I'm scared. There are so many ... questions (p. 331).

At last Eddie starts pouring out his sorrow and relates the strange events leading up to that dreadful night when his family was killed. He tells the audience about the film, "Jailhouse Rock" that he and his friends had gone to see and how he had dreamt of Elvis Presley "coming out of the light of the lamppost opposite the Carlton Bioscope" (p. 331), singing Eddie's favourite song, "One Night". The next day Eddie is told of a black woman who claimed that she saw Elvis in the light of the lamppost at about the same time as when he had his dream. Slabolepszy introduces

humour to evoke empathy and to provide relief from the seriousness of the moment; for example, Eddie consults the woman who corroborates his friends' story after he has consoled her not to feel bad about what she saw because Elvis could "astral-travel" (p. 332). (Slabolepszy's ridicule of the exaggerated claims of some over-the-top Americans, especially those who believe in the supernatural powers of their cult-heroes, is very funny.) Slabolepszy, in addition, also seems to be mocking young peoples' extreme gullibility regarding their super-heroes in the latter example.

Eddie is convinced that Elvis is calling him through all this, and that night he slips out of the house before midnight to meet his hero who, of course, does not materialise, but in so doing, Eddie misses being killed by his father as the rest of his family is. Slowly Eddie relives the fatal night and demonstrates in a very touching way how his loved ones were torn from him. Slabolepszy points out that through Eddie's enactment of the family slaughter, "*It is as if a huge load has been lifted off his shoulders*" (p. 333) and as he walks under the lamppost, it is as if he is walking on air. His soul cleansed, Eddie slowly rips his suicide note to pieces and walks towards his car singing "One Night". But before he reaches his car, the unmistakable strains of "One Night" fill the air in the voice of none other than Elvis Presley himself and it seems as though the song is coming out of the light of the lamppost. The song builds up to a crescendo as if Elvis is in concert with fans screaming. Slabolepszy's surreal ending is a *tour de force*:

Eddie is bathed in pink light – a mirror ball twirls and splashes points of light across the audience. Elvis is suddenly with us and EDDIE lets go with wild abandon.

After a good few bars, EDDIE stands centre stage, looking out and smiling. A pin-spot picks up his face and the light fades ...

The pin-spot fades to leave EDDIE smiling, Elvis singing and the crowd roaring ...

Blackout (p. 334).

## 6. Conclusion

Although one could argue that *The Return of Elvis du Pisanie* is not Slabolepszy's most powerful play abounding in hidden truths and profound messages, it is without doubt an extremely appealing play. One suspects that its success at the box-office and overall popularity cannot be ascribed to its technically sound structure and streamlined presentation only.

Slabolepszy bares the male psyche through Eddie's inward journey. In so doing, Slabolepszy demonstrates how his creation is able to revitalise and absolve himself, and finally find new meaning in his life. Herein also lies much of the play's rejuvenating force, for through Eddie, Slabolepszy demonstrates that renewal is possible for the audience as well. However, Slabolepszy invests the play with so much humour and comic relief that Eddie's heart-rending tale never becomes morbid, despite the tragic implications of the humour.

Greig (in the Foreword to Slabolepszy, 1994:vii) comments on Slabolepszy's ability in his more recent works to shift "from a social focus to a psychological focus and, in the process, maturing" – it is precisely this inward shift and maturity that Slabolepszy reveals in *The Return of Elvis du Pisanie* and which makes personal identification possible. Ashton (1992:12) perceptively summarises Slabolepszy's success in creating a character such as Eddie as follows: "Who would have thought that, in these times of national gloom, that the bafflement of a redundant middle-class, middle-aged white nonentity could evoke sympathy? Slabolepszy speaks for the species".

## Bibliography

- Ashton, L. 1992. Slabolepszy on the crest of the cowlick. *Business Day*: 12, August 7.
- Bentley, E. 1966. Tragedy and Comedy: Some Generalizations. In: Bentley, E. *The Life of the Drama*. London : Methuen. p. 257-315.
- Bentley, E. 1967. Tragedy in Modern Dress. In: Bentley, E. *The Playwright as Thinker: A Study of Drama in Modern Times*. New York : Harcourt, Brace & World. p. 23-47.
- Dickson, P. 1993. The small-town boy who made good in the world of theatre. *Eastern Province Herald*: 8, November 11.
- Elahi, N. 1992. Striking chords with Elvis. *The Citizen*: 23, September 30.
- Fielding, H. 1970. *Joseph Andrews*. London : Dent.
- Greig, R. 1994. Introduction. In: *Mooi Street and other Moves*. Johannesburg : Witwatersrand University Press. p. vii-xxi.
- Grobler, H. 1993. Kroniekskrywer trek groot gehore. *Tempo*: 5, February 25.
- Kerr, W. 1968. *Tragedy and Comedy*. London : The Bodley Head.
- MacHovec, F.J. 1988. *Humor: Theory History Applications*. Springfield : Charles C. Thomas.
- Marais, V. Slabolepszy's brilliant dip into nostalgia. *Daily Dispatch*: 10, October 15.
- McFadden, G. 1982. *Discovering the Comic*. Princeton : Princeton University Press.
- Mda, Z. 1990. *We shall sing for the Fatherland*. In: Mda, Z. *The Plays of Zakes Mda*. Johannesburg : Ravan Press. p. 23-48.
- Rutter, K. 1992. 'Breker' looks back in hope. *The Cape Times*: 4, December 12.
- Slabolepszy, P. 1985. *Saturday Night at the Palace*. Craighill : Donker.
- Slabolepszy, P. 1988. *Travelling Shots*. Johannesburg : Slabolepszy c/o Dalro, Braamfontein
- Slabolepszy, P. 1994. *The Return of Elvis du Pisanie*. In: Slabolepszy, P. *Mooi Street and other Moves*. Johannesburg : Witwatersrand University Press. p. 298-334.



Van Rooyen, B. 1993. One velleie here, one in US. *Pretoria News*: 3, May 12.

Van Deventer, M.A. 1999. Personal Angst. In: Van Deventer, M.A. *Paul Slabolepszy's Evocation of Empathy in a South African Setting: A Realisation of the Potential of Comic Technique*. Bloemfontein : UFS. (Ph.D. thesis.) p. 269-290.

**Key concepts:**

comic technique: tragic/comic/*angst*

Elvis era

empathy, evocation of

Paul Slabolepszy: playwright/play

South African setting

**Kernbegrippe:**

empatie ontlok

Elvis-era

komiese tegniek: tragies/komies/*angst*

Paul Slabolepszy: dramaturg/drama

Suid-Afrikaanse agtergrond

