

NanFlory



The ha-ha ditches of student life

Schadenfreude: the malicious enjoyment of the misfortune of others. It has always been a resoundingly German concept, in that it has not been British. The word's import into the English language in its original form is a sort of linguistic get out of jail free card to avoid cultural ownership of a rather disconcerting emotional response. A very British hand fits into that German glove; our instinctive recognition of Schadenfreude forces us to admit that the foreign label is just there to grant us a little bit of exonerating distance. Distance which, I've recently discovered, we can claim NO LONGER! As it turns out, the British representation of Schadenfreude just happens to be cunningly disguised in architectural terminology.

Brought to my attention by December's edition of *Vogue* magazine – apparently it's being resurrected as a “stylishly invisible alternative to a fence, for those with a garden and a park” – the ha-ha originates in the 18th century, and proves the vindictive streak I've always suspected in landscapers. Designed by Charles Bridgeman, it is “an ‘invisible’ ditch, first used to separate Kensington Gardens and Hyde Park.” Its name comes from the possibility of the ditch being disguised, an unsuspecting promenade falling into it – evoking ‘ha-ha’ in the poor thing's audience. Now isn't that just Schadenfreude embodied?

Excited by this revelation, I skipped off to tell my friends Jood and Methane all about it. “Guys!” I said, filled with the buzz of superiority which comes from knowing something other people don't know.

“I've found evidence of a native, organic construction of Schadenfreude! It's this thing called a ha-ha ditch!”

“Wow,” said Methane but Jood cut me short.

“Oh a ha-ha, of course I know what a ha-ha is.” My buzz was silenced as my hopes of winning a round of one-upmanship were quashed. It was as if I'd unknowingly stumbled straight into a

metaphorical ha-ha of my own and Jood was staring down at me, laughing away.

The whole episode got me thinking that the last year of university is full of these metaphorical ha-has. Everyone's lives stand to go in a totally new direction after graduation and we're secretly all hoping that it will be a good, successful one. A direction that might lead us to having to face *Vogue's* dilemma of owning both a garden and a park, rather than one that leads to sleeping on the streets, trying to blag a few pennies with a big sign which reads “My parents got killed by ninjas. Please help.” All this anxiety about the future makes for a student community which enjoys people corpsing during presentations or failing to meet deadlines or not getting employed; in the mind's ha-ha they go! Perhaps mostly because it makes the ranks of the unsuccessful seem a less lonely place to end up.

Oh dear, I don't mean to support the narrow definition of success it's all too easy to adopt as a finalist. Of course it's not all about money and status, but, come July, we will all be released into the fabled real world and be faced with the prospect of making something of ourselves. However we define that something, we all want it and when people around us fail hurdles in their way (or fall in ditches for that matter) there is a part of us which cries out: ha-ha! The ethos being, if they don't make it, maybe I will and it will be less bad if I screw up because they have too.

Regaining my reputation the Smash Hits way

Searching for strategies to raise my stakes in the popularity game after my smugly-headlined column in last month's edition, I turned to the people who play it professionally – pop stars. All Saints, having just re-launched their pop career are now popping up all over the press trying to revive their former status. This weekend, one of the Appleton sisters (the pair who don't sing that much) was inter-



The physical version of the mental ha-ha ditch that we delight in our fellow graduates falling into

Now I really don't think that all this ha-haing is a very nice way to go through the graduation process. I'm sure things would be far more pleasant if we were all a bit more generous to each other. But there is no denial of the tension, pre-emptive of the end of the education safety net, which is travelling in great waves through the class of 2007 – and how are we to release it if not through mental ha-has? I think the key lies in individuals being less afraid of failure and having more self-belief. My unlikely guru in this is Fergie, the perma-young singer for The Black Eyed

Peas. Quote of the month is: “Singing is a gift from God, and when people say I can't sing, it's kind of like insulting God.”

It really doesn't get much more fool-proof than that, does it? Hand over responsibility for your ambitions to someone else – it doesn't have to be an all knowing deity, it could be your mother, or your pet dog, or perhaps your favourite celebrity. Then, when you balls it up, you can blame them, which takes the pressure off and means you'll have the charitable magnitude to be nicer to other people and not shove them in your

mental ha-ha when things go wrong for them. Whilst laying the blame for not getting into the foreign office's fast track programme at Noel Edmund's door won't bring you any closer to actually becoming a diplomat, it will make the whole experience a little less threatening.

I've decided to give Jood the honour of being my life patron. I know this isn't in the spirit of the thing but I'd quite like to let her take on the burden of all my shortcomings. Quote of the month take two: Nan is a gift from Jood, any problems, talk to the latter.

What is your most treasured possession?

My face.

Would you rather be clever and ugly, or thick and attractive?

Thick and super hot!

What is the worst thing anyone's ever said to you?

No way are you too damn popular.

What do you owe your parents?

I owe my dad a birthday present.

Who would you invite to your dream dinner party?

I'd invite Michael Jackson and Jarvis Cocker and try and make them fight.

What song would you like played at your funeral?

‘I have a Ghost, Now What?’ By Jaga Jazzist – good one right?

How would you like to be remembered?

As popular.

What is the most important lesson life has taught you?

Never trust an aspiring journalist.