PERFORMING GREEK COMEDY

Alan Hughes presents a new complete account of production methods in Greek comedy. The book summarizes contemporary research and disputes, on such topics as acting techniques, theatre buildings, masks and costumes, music and the chorus. Evidence is reinterpreted, and traditional doctrine overthrown. Comedy is presented as the pan-Hellenic, visual art of theatre, not as Athenian literature. Recent discoveries in visual evidence are used to stimulate significant historical revisions. The author has directly examined 350 vase scenes of comedy in performance and actor-figurines, in 75 collections, from Melbourne to St Petersburg. Their testimony is applied to acting techniques and costumes, and women's participation in comedy and mime. The chapters are arranged by topic, for convenient reference by scholars and students of theatre history, literature, classics and drama. Overall, the book provides a fresh practical insight into this continually developing subject.

ALAN HUGHES is Professor Emeritus, University of Victoria, a theatre historian and professional who has operated his own repertory company. Published research includes *Henry Irving, Shakespearean*, an account of the actor-manager's productions, and his edition of *Titus Andronicus* in the New Cambridge Shakespeare series. In 2006 the T.B.L. Webster Fellowship recognized his contributions to the archaeology of Greek theatre, leading to the completion of *Performing Greek Comedy*.

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Preface

The need for a book like this one became apparent shortly after I was appointed as the theatre historian in a university Department of Theatre. Qualified for the job only because I had written a book about the theatre in nineteenth-century London, I was expected to teach the history of theatre from Greeks to Grotowski. This was, and still is, the normal state of affairs wherever there are broad studies of classical or western literature and drama, history of the theatre, ancient or western art. Few instructors in any of these disciplines command the leisure to master the current state of knowledge in a succession of fields of study which are no more than contiguous with their own. Three or four weeks are allocated to the Greeks; then one must get on to the Romans, Middle Ages, Renaissance. Teaching theatre history, my students and I needed a book which would summarize the state of contemporary research on the performance practice of Greek theatre, arranged systematically by topic. Since nothing of the sort was available, I was obliged to turn to the relevant chapters of Bieber's obsolete *History of the Greek and Roman Theatre*, first published in 1939. For many instructors and students, it remains the last resort.

That was why I conceived the notion of writing a book that would supersede Bieber. I am an historian of the theatre, not a classicist. It may be asked, where I found the temerity to write about Greeks. I approach the subject pragmatically, as a working theatre not unlike others. I examine it as a composite art, in which the text is only one component. For costume, masks, music, theatre buildings and equipment, acting style, I turn to the visual sources provided by archaeology. And to interpret what I see, I refer to a lifetime of experience in the living theatre and a working knowledge of how things are done, and made.

Research on eighteenth-century acting showed me that pictures are more reliable evidence than texts. While descriptions of style degenerate into assertions that the acting of the writer's time is 'more natural' than that of the previous generation, painters are fellow-artists, sympathetic and

observant. Eighteenth-century artists faithfully document actors, costumes, stage sets, theatres and audiences of their time. When I turned to the Greek theatre, however, there seemed to be little equivalent evidence.

Tragedy dominated the reading list, in which comedy was represented only by *Frogs*, which is about tragedy. In practice, 'Greek theatre' seemed to mean 'Athenian tragedy in the fifth century', for which surviving material evidence is inadequate. There was not one statue of a tragic actor, but some lively terracotta figurines seemed to be comic actors, masked and indecently costumed; and a handful of pots and fragments offered blurred and broken glimpses of comedy.

The breakthrough came in 1986, at my Faculty Club. Since nobody wanted to be seen lunching with the acting Dean, lest they be suspected of currying favour, I was free to look through a new issue of *Phoenix*. Thus I read Eric Csapo's account of a vase in Würzburg, with a detailed picture of a performance of a scene in Aristophanes. Yet the vase had been painted in Italy, in the fourth century. It was 'new' evidence, because its relevance had not hitherto been understood.

Many similar scenes were known, but they had been dismissed because they were thought to show crude Italian farces known as *phlyakes*. Now it seemed likely that many represented fourth-century performances of Athenian comedy, or something similar. And indeed, so it proved. More scenes have come to light, and their relevance to comedy has become widely accepted.

As far as possible, I have examined the primary material evidence, the vases and figurines, rather than photographs. This practice avoids mistakes, when smudged paint is interpreted as horns on a mask, a mysterious pyramid turns out to be cracks in the fabric, or an incised inscription is overlooked. I have never examined a comedy vase without learning something new. For research of this kind, a good deal of travel is required: I have visited 75 museums and private collections, and studied 350 artifacts.

This book deals only with comedy, for which vase painters used a highly realistic technique; tragic subjects were idealized. Most of the vases were painted in the Greek cities of southern Italy and Sicily, in the fourth century BCE. No doubt many of the comedies were written in Athens, but some may have been composed in Syrakousai or Taras, cities with a native dramatic tradition.

The Würzburg scene was painted many years after Aristophanes wrote the comedy it represents, and vases twenty years apart have scenes from the same comedy: evidently these were either local or touring performances of

old plays. By the fourth century, Athenian comedy was performed everywhere Greek-speakers lived; it had truly become 'Greek theatre'. Encouraged by the acknowledged relevance of *phlyax* scenes to 'legitimate' comedy, I have taken into account associated pictures from some of the same workshops, to extend the meaning of 'theatre' beyond the three official genres of the Athenian festivals. These feature performers in dramatic entertainments like the 'mime' described by Xenophon. These too may be termed Greek theatre; and its performers extend those boundaries farther still, because many are women.

Colleagues, curators, students and friends have assisted and advised me in the twenty-five years since I began the research leading to this book. I have accumulated a continuing debt to Sarah Stanton of Cambridge University Press, for concealing her consternation when an author she knew as a Shakespearean proposed a book about Greek comedy, and persevering in her faith that I would somehow bring it to a conclusion.

Richard Green, the master of this discipline, has been unfailing with advice and encouragement. I owe an equal debt to Grigoris Sifakis, for his wisdom and guidance as I ventured upon ground sometimes reserved for Classicists, and for helping me to win a T.B.L. Webster Fellowship, for which I am grateful to Michael Edwards and the Institute of Classical Studies. Jeffrey Rusten has been most generous with his assistance, and Eric Csapo encouraged me to press on, and to add New Comedy to my topics.

My research has been supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, ICS and the University of London. The University of Victoria provided preliminary faculty research grants, which brought me the aid of research assistants Ereca Hassell, Sylvia Diaz-Denz and Don DeMille.

This work has benefited from the generosity of private collectors Guido and Giovanna Malaguzzi Valeri, William Knight Zewadski, Alessandro Ragusa, Leonardo and Paula Mustilli, and George Ortiz, all of whom have graciously permitted me to examine and publish their treasures; and of James Ede, who provided me with two antiquities which illustrate this book.

Curators and superintendents of public collections have admitted me to the close examination of the unique artifacts which are the foundation of this book, and granted permission to publish them. Amongst the most helpful have been Giuseppi Andreassi and Teresa Cinquantoquattro, Puglia; Elena Lattanzi, Calabria; Amalia Curcio, Siracusa; Elio Galasso,

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I owe two of the illustrations to the talents of my daughter Katie. And the debt I owe to my wife Mary cannot be adequately acknowledged here. She has lived with Greek pots as long as she has lived with me. She accompanied every research trip, to Caltanissetta where the lights went out, and into the roof at Naples where she discovered a picture of one of the women whose acrobatic feats are exceeded only by Mary's feats of patience.

Finally, please note that dates are BCE, and approximate, unless otherwise indicated.