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978-0-521-12044-9 - The Stagecraft and Performance of Roman Comedy

C. W. Marshall

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## THE STAGECRAFT AND PERFORMANCE OF ROMAN COMEDY

A comprehensive survey of Roman theatrical production, this book examines all aspects of Roman performance practice, and provides fresh insights into the comedies of Plautus and Terence. Following an introductory chapter on the experience of Roman comedy from the perspective of Roman actors and the Roman audience, addressing among other things the economic concerns of putting on a play in the Roman republic, subsequent chapters provide detailed studies of troupe size and the implications for role assignment, masks, stage action, music, and improvisation in the plays of Plautus and Terence. Marshall argues that Roman comedy was raw comedy, much more rough-and-ready than its Hellenistic precursors, but still fully conscious of its literary past. The consequences of this lead to new conclusions concerning the dramatic structure of Roman comedy, and a clearer understanding of the relationship between the plays-as-text and the role of improvisation during performance.

C. W. MARSHALL teaches Greek and Latin literature at the University of British Columbia, Canada. His work has been published in many books and journals, including the *Journal of Hellenic Studies* and *Classical Quarterly*.

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For Jonah

*you got a face with a view*

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## *Preface*

Books on *The Stagecraft of Plautus* and *Roman Theatre Production* seem beyond our capabilities.

Goldberg (1998) 2

This book is about comedy, and, like most books about comedy, it does not contain nearly enough jokes; for that I apologise. I hope the book contains enough of interest to convey something of the excitement Plautus and Terence have brought me over the past several years. Stagecraft and performance are a challenge to document, and the separation of twenty-two centuries has done little to make it easier. I have attempted to present a consistent, credible, and comprehensive picture of how the mechanics of the Plautine stage functioned, and in most respects the picture remains true for Terence. I have tried to remain grounded in the text of the plays, but a lack of evidence has meant that some speculation has been necessary, and I know that not all readers will accept all the conclusions. It is possible to isolate various claims – to agree with what I say about masks, but not about improvisation, for example – but taken together, it is hoped that the resulting picture remains true to what we understand of the text of Plautus, even given the necessary limits that such a claim must entail.

Roman comedies were intended for production. My purpose is to examine a number of aspects of the performance and stagecraft of Roman comedy, with an emphasis on Plautus. The term ‘performance’ concentrates on the experience of the play as presented to an audience. Performance is the event where actor and audience meet. Peter Brook has reduced this idea to its rawest form in his famous dictum at the beginning of *The Empty Space* (1968, 11): ‘I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged.’ ‘Stagecraft’ takes a step back, and examines the resources

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available to the playwright as he crafts his play, and the decisions made by playwright and director to facilitate communication with the audience. Stagecraft concerns the often gritty backstage reality of mounting a play, and the restrictions and opportunities offered to performers that creating a narrative for a live audience presents. Together stagecraft and performance create a direct line of communication from the playwright to the director to the actors to the audience.

For some, these are modest concerns: Aristotle notoriously makes ὄψις ('spectacle'), the least of the parts of Greek tragedy (*Poetics* 1450b16–20). Many of my concerns are addressed in George E. Duckworth's *The Nature of Roman Comedy* (1952; a 'second edition' appeared in 1994, but since Duckworth's text remains unaltered, I continue to refer to Duckworth (1952) and use Hunter (1994) only when referring to the bibliographic appendix that was added) and William Beare's *The Roman Stage* (3rd edn, 1964). Both works are infused with an understanding of the theatre, and represent the ground on which I hope to build. Several advances since their publication have dated their conclusions. In particular, Niall Slater's *Plautus in Performance* (1985; 2nd edn, 2000) altered the landscape for interpreting Plautine comedy by providing a vocabulary for metatheatre. 'Metatheatre', as Slater uses the term, is a dramatic technique whereby characters on stage acknowledge their status as characters in a play. Euanthius calls it *vitium Plauti frequentissimum* (*de Fabula* 3.8: 'Plautus' most frequent fault') – and it was not seen as a virtue of Plautus' dramaturgy until an article by M. Barchiesi in 1970, after Duckworth and Beare were writing. Each of my six chapters contributes to this perspective. The first three describe the resources available to a Roman comic playwright c. 200 BC. The last three address different ways that Plautus patterns his narrative so that his desired effect will be maximised.

I have tried to write for both students and professionals in Classics and Theatre, but many disclaimers are needed. This is not a 'how-to' manual for directing Plautus today, though it would be possible to use the ideas here to create exciting, funny performances that have Plautine elements in them. Unattributed translations are my own, but I cite others when I am concerned about slanting translations so that they are favourable to my argument. The manuscripts divide the plays into acts and scenes, but since such divisions had no meaning for the Roman playwrights, I have resorted to reckoning by line number, which at least has the virtue of precision. Over the past century, Plautus has remained in need of textual criticism. None of the editions by Leo (1895–96), Lindsay (1904–05, rev.



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1910), and Ernout (1932–61) is completely satisfactory, and Plautinists eagerly await the completion of a new text, the *Editio Plautina Sarsinates*, beginning with Quеста (2001). For Terence I have consulted Kauer and Lindsay (1926, with additions 1958) and Barsby (2001). My citations reflect the eclectic state of the text, though I have normalised orthography. While Lindsay is not the best version available for Plautus, it is the most accessible, and so I have used it exclusively when presenting statistics or surveying the entire corpus. Other options were available, but this seemed the most transparent. At times I use statistics because they can help one to see unexpected patterns. There is a danger that this will appear to present a pseudo-scientific degree of certainty greater than the data in fact warrant. When included, statistics principally offer transparency (so that the reader may see the basis for a conclusion). Ancient works are referred to by Latin or English title depending on what seems most natural to me, but the result will not please everyone. Throughout I assume a relatively sophisticated economic model for the functioning of *ludi scaenici*. It is not possible to account for all variables, but I have tried to ground what I say in the real-world pressures that would affect an itinerant troupe working in and around Rome.

If *Asinaria*, *Curculio*, and *Miles Gloriosus* receive particular attention, it is because of the casts and crews of the Plautine productions I have directed: *Curculio* (Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario; March 1996); *Asinaria* (University of Victoria, Victoria, BC; March 1997); *Miles Gloriosus* (Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's, Newfoundland; October, 1999). All three were produced through Modern Actors Staging Classics (MASC), with translations by Peter L. Smith. I see these productions as experiments, testing hypotheses about ancient performance, allowing me to corroborate and modify conclusions that would otherwise have remained theoretical. Because an effect worked (or failed to work) in my productions does not prescribe how Plautus must have staged the play. Student actors were masked and the outdoor performances ran for several days in the early afternoon, in all weathers. Audiences did not buy tickets, but often had to be drawn away by the performance from other distractions (lunch, friends, classes). Seats were available, and a minimal set of empty doorframes was used in a found-space performance area (always a high-traffic location on campus). Roles were doubled and improvisation encouraged. All of these factors correspond in some degree to what I believe transpired on the Roman stage. Rehearsing and watching the performances taught me a great deal about what is possible with Roman comedy. At times, this experience

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strengthened my convictions, while at others it sent me back to the text to reconsider. The casts endured completely unreasonable requests, performing in snow, rain, and (literally) gale-force winds. At times, actors are amazing. They know when a scene is not working, and they let you know when an explanation or decision is not coherent. Since in no case did any of the actors have more than a year of Latin, they could not be expected to adopt scholarly solutions on principle. In other contexts, Mary-Kay Gamel and Amy Richlin gave me a chance to perform in *Persa* and George Adam Kovacs gave me a chance to act in masks when he directed *Rhesus*. Both experiences corrected misapprehensions I had.

Since 1987, many hundreds of hours of my life have been mis-spent improvising on stage and in workshops, and this has taught me more than anything else about theatre, performance, and making an audience laugh. It has made me a better actor, and perhaps helped me perceive things in scripted comedy I would otherwise have missed. Thanks are due to the many people I have shared a stage with, but in particular I am grateful to my improv groups in Montreal, Edinburgh, and Sackville, New Brunswick.

Much of this research was funded by a Standard Research Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Other funding was received from the University of Victoria, the Memorial University of Newfoundland, the University of British Columbia, and from an Overseas Research Fellowship at the University of South Africa. Parts of Chapter 3 appeared in *Social Identity*, and I am grateful to the editors for permission to use them here.

Many individuals have helped me, too. Peter Smith has helped me appreciate Plautus more than anyone else, and I cannot repay him for his kind offer to translate *Curculio* and *Asinaria* for my productions. Had he not done so, this book would not exist. Tim Moore, Fred Franko, David Creese, John Starks, and Jim Russell read portions of the manuscript and saved me from at least some of my gaffes. George Adam Kovacs, Michael J. Griffin, and Michael S. Leese were exceptional research assistants, and I was lucky to benefit from their skills, which are many. Niall Slater and Sander Goldberg have given me continued encouragement, and have taught me much about Plautus, and so I trust they will forgive my temerity when I disagree with them. Elaine Fantham, David Wiles, Susanna Braund, Ian Storey, John Porter, Lyn Rae, Mary-Kay Gamel, Mark Damen, George Harrison, Annette Teffeteller, Rob Ketterer, Paul Wilson, Jim Butrica, and Mark Joyal have also (in some cases unknowingly) given me encouragement in various forms at various stages, which has helped a great deal, as have my wonderful parents.

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Victoria Cooper at Cambridge University Press, along with Elizabeth Davey, Rebecca Jones, Nancy-Jane Rucker and no doubt many others, has provided valuable help and support. Students at Trent University, Concordia University, the Memorial University of Newfoundland, and the University of British Columbia have read plays with me in class, and forced me to answer questions I otherwise would not have touched.

My wife Hallie challenges me and charms me with her perception and insight, and she has given much of her time to me reading drafts, making masks, and listening to jokes when she had better things to do. Jonah Franklin Marshall works harder at making people laugh than anyone I know, and he can always make me smile.

The deaths of Jim Butrica and Peter Smith in the summer of 2006 mark a great loss for Latin studies in Canada. I was honoured to have both men as colleagues and friends, and I shall miss wisdom and wit.