

CHAPTER I

Comedy in art, Athens and abroad

Theatre is a mimetic art, composite and ephemeral. Directed by an underlying aesthetic, conscious or intuitive, theatrical imitation may be culturally determined or intellectually constructed. Performers deliberately imitate the 'other', whether human or animal, divine or spirit, allegory or force of nature. This *mimesis* is a compound, a variable array of associated arts, which may include music, dance, song and speech, supported by oral or literary composition. And every performance occurs in a unique, irrecoverable moment of time. Greek theatre is no exception. Ancient performances cannot be revived, but we have learned a good deal about their form and circumstances.

This is a book about performance practice, the art of comic theatre in classical Greece. Historically, comedy has been examined less thoroughly than tragedy, in part perhaps because the extant texts are fewer and less representative, and documentary evidence comparatively scarce. While thirty-three extant tragedies are attributed to the three most celebrated poets, we have only eleven comedies by Aristophanes, and one by Menander, with some substantial fragments. The works of their rivals have disappeared. The extant tragedies represent continuous development during the greater part of the fifth century, while the comedies yield little more than snapshots of two widely separated eras.¹

Archaeology has contributed evidence of comic performance, but much of it refers to performance beyond Attica, principally in the western Greek cities of Sicily and Megale Hellas – southern Italy – during the fourth century. Traditionally, this is neither the place nor the period in which we were most interested, because the great Attic tragedies of the fifth century became established as essential Greek literature, in much the same way as we have adopted Shakespeare's plays as literature. Nevertheless, in the working theatre of their time, Greek play-texts, like Shakespeare's manuscripts, were simply one component in the creative array. They were

'scripts', composed to support theatrical speech and choral song. And if the fourth century has not endured in memory as a Golden Age of tragic literature, it may yet be perceived as the first great age of theatrical art, when an innovative actors' theatre disseminated Athenian culture wherever Greek was spoken. The surviving texts and fragments of comedy and commentary are essential primary resources for the study of Greek theatre. With their testimony, this book will consider extensive archaeological evidence, much of it recently discovered, or newly interpreted. While fragments of Menander still come to light in Egypt, the sands have yielded neither Eratosthenes' lost treatise on Old Comedy nor the seventeen-volume *History of the Theatre* by King Juba II of Mauretania. Until that happens, our best evidence for comedy performance is found in vase painting and terracotta figurines.

The significance of these materials has been underappreciated. Black-figured vase scenes showing men costumed as birds and knights seemed to foreshadow Aristophanes' choric titles, but they were painted much too early.² A few pictures, including another bird-chorus, can be dated closer to the lifetime of Aristophanes, but most are damaged, controversial, or show children dressed up as actors. The only scene that included a stage was not available for study between 1935 and 2005.³ Vases painted in Greek cities of Sicily and Megale Hellas in the fourth century were usually acknowledged to be both Greek and theatrical, but most scholars denied any relevance to Athenian comedy. They were believed to represent *phlyakes*, a type of 'low-class Italian farce'. When terracotta figurines of comic actors were excavated in the Greek west, they too were dismissed as *phlyakes*. Those with an undeniably Athenian provenance were a conundrum which only Webster dared to address. If the style and type of mask, the padded costume and outrageous artificial *phallos* were demonstrably identical with those worn by the *phlyakes*, he asked whether the latter might represent Attic comedy instead. The reaction was swift, and negative.⁴

Almost forty years later, Csapo and Taplin positively identified the picture on a newly published Apulian *phlyax* vase by the Schiller Painter as the scene in Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazousai* in which Euripides' Kinsman threatens to stab the wineskin-baby, which is represented complete with the 'booties' to which the text refers. Taplin proposed more identifications of vase scenes with Attic comedies, and most scholars have subsequently come round to the view that both *phlyax* vases and terracottas represent Athenian comedy, west Greek performances in the Athenian manner, or blended variations of both.⁵

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THE EVIDENCE

Vases

The earliest fabrics of red-figured pottery in the west were probably established by immigrants from Athens. The first was a workshop in Metapontion (Metaponto), where production began before the end of the fifth century; a shop in nearby Taras (Taranto) opened a decade later. Most vase scenes are either Dionysian, with the god accompanied by maenads and satyrs, or mythological narratives, sometimes apparently connected to tragedy. Following Athenian practice, the painters avoid representing tragic scenes literally, as they would have appeared in the theatre. Instead, they show a 'further reality' of the myth, where some artists may have been influenced by direct experience of the theatre. Comedy called for a different convention, because neither the characters nor their story had any previous, independent existence. They were entirely invented by the author, and therefore neither comic characters themselves nor the actors who presented them consistently pretended that they were real. Old Comedy was 'metatheatre', in which all were 'aware of their own theatricality', and shared that consciousness with the audience. While Athenian artists could not agree how to represent a comic scene, their western colleagues understood comedy's self-referentiality, and adopted conventions which were the diametric opposite of those used for tragic-mythical scenes. 'It is not quite true that there is a total lack of dramatic illusion', says Green, 'but depictions of comedy are of men dressed up being funny'.⁶ The actor is shown literally, the details of his mask, costume and gestures as accurate as the painter can make them.

The earliest scenes from Metapontion show actors 'stage-naked', no doubt to exploit the novelty of their wrinkled and padded tights, the grotesque, sometimes identical masks, and their attitudes of laughably exaggerated dignity (Figure 1).⁷ The first pictures of complete comic scenes on a stage were painted in Taras, by the artists we know as the Tarporley and Choregos Painters.⁸ From the first half of the fourth century, Tarentine workshops have left us more than seventy complete scenes with two or more actors, including *Thesmophoriazousai* and three different moments in an unknown comedy, each by a different artist. About thirty more are portraits of actors in character.⁹ The earliest red-figured fabric in Sicily seems to have commenced operations in Syrakousai (modern Siracusa) shortly after the defeat of the Athenian expedition in 413, but theatrical subjects do not appear until c.380, when several mythological scenes, which may be

‘informed’ by tragedy, are attributed to the Dirce Painter.¹⁰ The same artist furnished one known comic scene, the earliest Sicilian example, but in view of Sicily’s theatrical sophistication, it is remarkable that few similar pictures have come to light until forty years later, when the Lentini-Manfria Group began illustrating novel stage conventions.

Towards the middle of the fourth century, a generation of artists emigrated from Sicily, perhaps to escape political turmoil and civil war. Some set up shop in distant Campania, and one seems to have fetched up in Albania. Asteas had been an established painter somewhere in Sicily when he moved to Poseidonia (Paestum), where comedy was rarely if ever seen. Establishing a workshop, he found a ready market for Dionysian scenes, often autographed by the painter. These show the god as a *komast*, frequently attended by comic actors wearing distinctive costumes which Asteas may have seen in Sicily before he emigrated. After Timoleon imposed a comparative peace in 338, Sicily experienced a revival of comedy and painting. Vigorous scenes began to appear, with up to four actors performing on a new type of stage. In some instances, the conventions of New Comedy masks and costumes seem to have been emerging, but before the transition was complete, artists turned from red-figure to new styles.¹¹

Figurines

Terracotta figurines of actors are another valuable resource, particularly for the costumes worn in comedy. A few have long been recognized as Athenian, but scholars who denied that Aristophanes tolerated the artificial *phallos* preferred to relegate the earliest figures to a date after his death, which safely quarantined them in the Middle Comedy period. Today, the ‘New York Group’ is believed to date from the end of the fifth century. These skilful figurines, said to have been found in a single grave in Athens, represent the essential character types of comedy: old men, slaves, young women of ambiguous virtue, Herakles, a foolish youth, the nurse and crone. Cast in moulds, they were mass-produced for domestic and export markets, perhaps as souvenirs. They were copied and adapted by local coroplasts in many Greek towns, notably on Lipari, an island near the north-eastern coast of Sicily. Local types were also made in widespread workshops, no doubt reflecting regional styles of comedy. Production in Athens continued to develop through the New Comedy period, with lively new figures still appearing in the first century BCE.¹²

Much of this book is based upon the evidence of more than 200 comic vases, and many other scenes of tragedy, *symposion* entertainers and related

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subjects. Almost 400 terracotta figurines have been consulted, in 250 different character types and poses.¹³ Like the vases, many were made in western Greek workshops during the fourth century. Together, these two types of visual evidence are the foundation of chapters which analyse acting and acting style, costumes and masks, theatre structures and performances involving women. While formal comedy is central, ‘classical Greek theatre’ is taken to refer to a variety of performances, wherever Greeks lived, during the fifth and fourth centuries. The author does not pretend to offer significant new perspectives on dramatic literature. An account of the poets and their plays is provided, with suggestions of scenes and figures which might illustrate performance of different types of comedy, and sometimes, specific plays. In the same spirit, chapters on the chorus, music and New Comedy outline contemporary thinking on these topics, from a viewpoint informed, and illustrated, by the visual evidence.

Is this evidence reliable?

The material evidence of vase scenes must be used with discretion, compounded of basic understanding of the material, and common sense. We should recognize that each artist’s accuracy depended upon the individual skills which he brought to his craft, his opportunities to observe his subjects, and his objectives. Neither vase scenes nor figurines are photographs, and while most painters aspired to a measure of naturalism for human figures, few recorded contexts or peripheral details with photographic fidelity. It is unlikely that they sat in the theatre with a sketch-pad; painters and the coroplasts who made actor-figurines probably copied from memory, rather than from life.

Scenes of tragedy were presented as myth by Athenian painters; as Csapo points out, ‘no matter how directly inspired by the theatre, [they] drew not masks, but faces, not stages, but palaces or temples, not messengers narrating, but the concrete actions reported by their narratives’. Apulian artists sometimes modified this convention by alluding to stage costume and properties; for example, a humble messenger could be shown wearing elaborate tragic costume and boots (*kothoroi*). Nevertheless, it is frequently difficult to distinguish scenes related to tragedy from those representing pure myth.¹⁴

The painters’ treatment of comedy could be inferred by comparing the shapes of pots. While most mythic-tragic scenes are found on large, prestigious vessels such as volute *kraters*, a comic scene typically decorates a modest bell *krater* or small jug (*oinochoe*), used to serve wine at a drinking

party (*symposion*): the former is heroic, the latter, Dionysian. As in tragedy, the circumstances, objectives and skills of artists working in different fabrics determine the value of their testimony. Classical Athenian sculpture strove for naturalism, tempered by an ideal of beauty. Seeking a convention for the display of a relative novelty such as comic actors, a few Athenian artists experimented with naturalistic detail. For example, the Nikias Painter plainly shows that an actor as a slave wears an oversized *phallos* and wrinkled, droopy tights; but in the same scene, the artist withholds from Herakles and Nike any comparable sign of theatrical contrivance (Figure 18).¹⁵ The Athenian painter of the Perseus Dance scene was adept at depicting human bodies and their drapery, but he had no established convention to follow when he composed the earliest surviving picture of a stage, muddling perspective and the compression needed to depict such a large object on a small pot. Indeed, the techniques needed to produce a creditable picture of a building seem to have baffled many vase painters. Long after artists in the west had adopted a consistently realistic convention for an actor's costume, mask and gestures, the majority continued to approach structures with crude draughtsmanship and extreme dimensional compression.¹⁶ When exceptional artists took the trouble to learn how to represent the way in which a structure was actually built – a stage or the stairs linking it to ground, *skene* doors or the porch that sheltered them – the structural details make sense to a modern carpenter, and suggest how the pictures of the less accomplished vase painters should be interpreted. The most sceptical critics acknowledge that artists mutually confirm the details of stage structures, costumes and masks, while denying their utility in attempts to reconstruct lost plays.¹⁷

Athenian comic scenes of this period are as uneven in quality as they are rare, but the coroplasts who moulded the original statuettes of the New York group show an attention to detail which must have been carefully observed from comic theatre practice. For several decades, painters in Metapontion and Taras confirm the authenticity of these images, notably in the exact correspondence between no fewer than nine details in the dialogue of *Thesmophoriazousai* and the Schiller Painter's picture. The most determined of sceptics admits that the scene must be connected with the comedy, while our leading authority on the vases affirms, 'There can be nowadays no doubt that most of them show Athenian comedy.'¹⁸ The accuracy of their testimony is verified by agreement between independent artists. Actors with the same distinctive mask and walking-stick show up in scenes by three different artists, two of which involve geese.¹⁹ Numerous painters in several different cities arrived at the same fundamental convention,

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which amounted almost to inversion of the way heroic scenes of myth and tragedy were represented. For scenes of comedy, artists took pains to avoid idealization and illusion. Tragedy refashions the characters and narratives of myth, but comic stories and their characters have no separate existence. Artists had no reason to depict them as other than they really were, actors in costume, performing on a platform. Indeed, had comedy tacitly invited the audience to suspend disbelief, pretending that masks were real faces, tights were bare skin, padded bodies and a grotesque *phallos* were real, artists invariably showed, in detail, the utter failure of that illusion. Of course, there was no such attempt; the clumsy artifice was self-referential, an essential part of the humour. Tights were noticeably wrinkled, and sagged over the actor's feet; there were visible seams at the cuffs, and sometimes down the legs. Artists delighted in displaying actors as 'stage-naked', permitting the viewer to see how the arms and legs of tights (fleshings) were fastened to the torso, and how the latter was lumpily padded.²⁰ The *phallos* was manifestly unreal, and the mask was clearly shown as a false face, sometimes inhumanly grotesque.

After Asteas reached Paestum about mid-century, new circumstances altered his objectives. Now his actors appeared exclusively in male parts, and rarely in dramatic scenes, but they continued to wear metatheatrical tights in which a dark torso contrasted with skin-coloured fleshings and breasts.²¹ Since several other painters show similar costumes, we may suppose that Asteas began to illustrate a new trend in tights shortly before he emigrated, and in isolated Paestum he continued to paint from memory what he had seen in Sicily. His costumes, therefore, and perhaps the masks and gestures, are useful for comedy in Sicily c.350, but we cannot rely upon him for evidence of comic practice at a later date or another location. This is partially confirmed by the 'Manfria Group' of painters who emerged in Sicily a decade after his departure. Their scenes show a new configuration of stage and *skene*, naturalistic masks for actors playing young characters, and costumes that decently hide the *phallos*. Evidently, production methods continued to evolve.

FESTIVAL AND COMPETITION

Growing awareness of archaeological evidence has renewed interest in early vase scenes, which may help to unravel an obstinate problem. The origins of comedy are even older and more elusive than those of tragedy. Tradition attributed the 'invention' of comedy to a certain Sousarion, who was said to have competed for a prize of figs in Ikarion, coincidentally the same

Attic deme in which Thespis, the similarly legendary inventor of tragedy, was said to have competed for a goat. Remarkably close to Sousarion's traditional dates, black-figured vases show men wearing fanciful costumes, who dance to a piper's music. From these it is inferred that a prototype comedy-chorus may have existed in Attica by c.560.²²

Seven hundred kilometres to the west, a parallel development was occurring independently. We know nothing of the origin of Sicilian comedy, or whether Epicharmos, its earliest named poet, called his plays 'comedies'. Fragments do not tell us whether he used a chorus, but his mythological plots may have been related to some of the earliest Athenian comedies. Epicharmos' career probably began before the end of the sixth century, in Megara Hyblaia; perhaps when that city was destroyed in 483, he moved to nearby Syrakousai. The extent of early intersection between Sicilian and Attic comic traditions is unknown, but fragments by later poets show that distinctive Sicilian comedy was still being composed after 450.²³ No doubt the relationship between the traditions was more intricate than we can discern, or hope to disentangle. While some circumstances of performance in Attica are well documented, we are remarkably ignorant of practices in Sicily and the Italian peninsula, particularly in the fifth century. Vases and figurines show that by the fourth century, comic costumes, masks and stages were much the same everywhere, but western Greeks do not seem to have shared the Athenian impulse to commemorate public events and responsible personalities with stone inscriptions.

From the earliest times, Athenians celebrated their festivals with competitions, in athletics, music, poetry – and drama. Greeks revelled in *agon*, the relentless competition from which we derive 'agony': these people devised the Olympic Games. As Revermann observes, 'the agonal spirit pervades Greek social practices: if there is no competition, Greeks are sure to create one'. Competition took place in the presence of an audience, which gathered in a *theatron* or 'watching place' to take part in the *agon*. The nature of audience participation has been explored as ritual, as an expression of the Athenian *polis*, or as critical and judgemental. Its fundamental character was probably far from passive: theatre can only occur when performers and audience interact. Poets and performers continually courted spectator approval, as they do today, and because Old Comedy was metatheatrical, this manipulation could be either direct or subtle.²⁴ Moreover, competition made consequences more tangible and immediate: the judges sat in broad daylight, where actors could see how they were taking it.

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Greeks had neither the Judaeo-Christian Sabbath nor the 'weekend' that grew out of it in the nineteenth century. Work carried on every day, except when a festival enabled whole communities to make holiday together. The most important Athenian festival was the mid-summer Panathenaia, which honoured the city's tutelary goddess with a procession, followed by musical and athletic competitions. Late in the sixth century, a minor festival was transformed into a showcase for the *polis*. The City or Great Dionysia was celebrated in the month of Elaphebolion (March/April), when winter gales had subsided, permitting visitors from overseas to attend. Proceedings began with demonstrations of Athenian wealth and power, and the image of Dionysos was carried into the theatre, where it stood in the front row near his chief priest.²⁵

Competition for tragedy was introduced about 528, in the time of the tyrant Peisistratos; twenty years later, an *agon* was added for dithyrambic choruses representing the ten new 'tribes' organized by Kleisthenes. Comic choruses participated unofficially on the 'fringe' until 486, when comedy was formally admitted to the festival programme. The first victor may have been Chionides, with a chorus costumed as dolphin-riders.²⁶

Every Dionysia in the fifth century was a festival of new plays. The responsible *archon* determined who would be 'granted a chorus', assigning a wealthy citizen to serve as *choregos*, who financed and organized a comedy as a 'liturgy', a combination of tax and public service. Five comedies were performed, either all on one day or on each of five days otherwise devoted to dithyrambs and tetralogies, which comprised three tragedies and a satyr play.²⁷ Competition was keen, and audiences expressed their opinions energetically; care was taken to ensure that the five judges were selected impartially. First, second and third prizes were awarded to the victorious *choregos* and poet, who competed as director of the chorus (*didaskalos*). Compared to dithyramb, a comic or tragic liturgy was modest, and prizes were more symbolic than substantial.²⁸

A second Dionysian festival was transferred to the Theatre of Dionysos c.444–441. Celebrated in the month of Gamelion (January/February), when hazardous weather discouraged travel by sea, the Lenaia was well suited to satirical comedy because a poet could not be accused of 'defaming the city in the presence of foreigners'. Comic poets entered one play, while tragedians entered two rather than a trilogy, as they did at the Great Dionysia. Because it is uncertain whether Sophokles or Euripides ever competed, it has been suggested that the Lenaia was 'less highly regarded' than the Great Dionysia, or that the poets were 'on a lower level'.²⁹ In

fact, the best comic poets took part: Aristophanes, Kratinos and Eupolis all competed in 425, and it was at the Lenaia that Aristophanes enjoyed the unique honour of a second performance of *Frogs* following his victory in 405.

A prize for a tragic *protagonist* was offered for the first time about 449, at the Great Dionysia, and by 432 an actor's *agon* in each genre had been established at the Lenaia. This acknowledged a significant change in emphasis. Early poets were members of a literate elite, whose private means allowed them to write, compose, choreograph and even to lead the chorus or act, if they chose. In the best sense of the word, they were amateurs, who sought only the honour symbolized by the victor's wreath. Aischylos and Sophokles withdrew from acting, recruiting their *protagonists* from an emerging class of specialists in the distinctive new craft of actor. With their help, a poet had a better chance of victory. For similar reasons, Aristophanes found an experienced *didaskalos* like Kallistratos to direct his plays; when Platon the poet tried his hand at directing his own comedy, he placed fourth.³⁰

THE PROFESSION OF ACTOR

Specialization signified an advance in theatrical quality. Production standards had to improve, because, like the Parthenon, begun in 447, the Great Dionysia became a showcase of Athenian culture, imperial prestige and power. Early comedy had been primarily choric, but two or more actors were essential for a new type of narrative comedy, which had a unified plot. Now *protagonists* competed for a prize of their own, and some began to emerge as professionals. Like the Parthenon's architect, Iktinos, actors learned that they could make a living by practising their art beyond the city, first in the Attic demes, and subsequently abroad.

At least five of Attica's 139 demes had theatres by the end of the fifth century, and there is evidence of theatrical activity in many more. It has been assumed that dramatic performances at their 'rural' Dionysia were 'shoddy, derivative, late, lumpish and short'; but if that was the case, it is strange that Plato should refer to enthusiasts who 'run about to all the Dionysia, never missing one'. Moreover, inscriptions name Aristophanes, Kratinos, Sophokles and Euripides as victors at deme festivals. Aelian says Sokrates went to Peiraeus to see performances of Euripides, Parmeno the celebrated comic actor was said to have acted at Kollytos and a fourth-century inscription from Thorikos probably commemorates a victory by Theodoros, the great *protagonist* of women's roles, who is praised by Aristotle.³¹