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20th and 21st Century Reception and Staging of Roman Comedy

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► **To cite this version:**

Céline Candiard. 20th and 21st Century Reception and Staging of Roman Comedy. Martin Dinte. The Cambridge Companion to Roman Comedy, Cambridge University Press, pp.350-366, 2018, 978-0521173889. 10.1017/9780511740466.024 . halshs-01998913

HAL Id: halshs-01998913

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01998913>

Submitted on 11 Apr 2024

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Roman Comedy on Stage and Screen in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries
in *A Cambridge Companion to Roman Comedy*, sous la direction de Martin
Dinter, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 325-338

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With the declining importance of classics in secondary education, particularly after the Second World War, the general knowledge of Plautus' and Terence's drama amongst the Western population waned: as Latin progressively became a rare option, offered only in some schools to the best or most motivated students, the classical authors who had once dominated school culture were counted more and more as exotic curiosities that pupils rarely discovered before college. This progressive exclusion of classical comedy from the field of general culture in the course of the twentieth century was in part compensated, although for a much more restricted public, by the development of scholarly interest in the subject, with numerous articles, studies and critical editions and translations of Plautus' and Terence's plays in academic publications. Roman comedy is now, along with Greek bucolic or Etruscan archaeology, a specialised field in the academic discipline of classics.

However, largely because of the decisive influence of Roman comedy on early-modern European drama (particularly literary greats such as Shakespeare and Molière, see Candiard, Miola and Hurka in this volume), Plautus' and Terence's plays occasionally capture the interest of professional stage-directors, even though most Roman comedy productions are nowadays put on in academic contexts. In addition, Roman comedy still inspires playwrights, although less frequently than in the early-modern period, to adaptations or rewriting: some base their work on one particular play, such as the authors of the many modern versions of Plautus' *Amphitruo*, whereas others combine several Roman plays and employ some typical plot pattern or conventional role types, as can be observed in original creations such as Burt Shevelove and Larry Gelbart's 1962 musical *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. Lastly, a more furtive influence of Roman comic conventions and codes can be observed on various forms of

comedy, often outside the sphere of theatre as such: disparate works such as P.G. Wodehouse's Jeeves stories or popular television comedy shows or movies offer excellent examples of the ongoing vitality of the Roman model.

Plautus and Terence on Stage

This vitality, however, is not obvious at first sight. Although twentieth century theatre companies and stage directors have demonstrated clear interest in ancient drama and have integrated it into the general repertoire, their curiosity has almost exclusively benefited Greek tragedy, while comedy in general, and Roman comedy in particular, has often remained ignored. Such unequal treatment is easy to explain: not only has tragedy profited from strong positive prejudice since the early-modern period, mainly due to the perceived nobleness of its subject matter. For Greek literature and arts in general had been promoted, particularly in nineteenth and early twentieth century German historiography, by a mythological vision of Greece as the cradle of Western civilisation, which makes Roman culture appear at best as a pale copy. As a result, whereas Aeschylus', Sophocles' and Euripides' tragedies are frequently translated and staged and perceived as carrying profound, universal messages, Plautus' and Terence's plays are rarely touched by theatre practitioners, and thus largely denied the prominence Greek tragedy enjoys in the Western cultural heritage.

Nevertheless, Roman comedy has not disappeared altogether from the modern stage. During the twentieth century, and still in the twenty-first century, teachers, academics and even students have manifested their historical or textual approach to the ancient material in various versions of Plautine or Terentian works. These range from reconstructions of the original stagings, modelled on archaeological and iconographical evidence, to modern translations, transpositions and adaptations. The many and various scholarly productions of Roman comedy present such an overwhelming contrast with the relative disinterest of the professional scene that the phenomenon deserves to be noted. Indeed, the Oxford-based Archive of Performance of Greek and Roman Drama lists a large number of school or university productions for performances of Plautus' or Terence's plays

between 1900 and 2011.¹ Most of them took place in universities with important classics faculties, such as Oxford, Cambridge, Edinburgh, Glasgow or Warwick in the United Kingdom, Harvard, Dartmouth, Wellesley, Bryn Mawr, St Olaf or Michigan University in the United States, and also Sydney (Australia), Munich (Germany), Neuchâtel (Switzerland) and the Sorbonne (France), to quote only the most frequent. While some of them are performed by student societies (such as the “Groupe de Théâtre Antique” of the Université de Neuchâtel), they are generally supervised by an academic specialised in ancient drama. Many productions are staged in venues linked to research institutions, such as the Loeb Drama Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where a translation of Plautus’ *Braggart Soldier (Miles Gloriosus)* by the scholar Erich Segal was put on in 1963, or the Malibu Getty Villa, for which Richard Beacham, from the University of California, advised on a production of Plautus’ *Casina* in 1994.

Academic involvement in ancient comedy performances does not necessarily preclude professional production. The Getty Villa in particular invites stage directors and theatre companies every year to rehearse produce a production of classical theatre, offering them the expertise of academics. In 2007, award-winning director Meryl Friedman put on *Tug of War*; an adaptation of Plautus’ *Rudens* translated by Amy Richlin, a professor in Classics at UCLA. Unlike most university productions, *Tug of War* presented the audience with an actual adaptation of the ancient play to a contemporary context: the setting was transferred from Cyrene to post-Katrina New Orleans, and the characters were turned into an all-African-American cast, dressed in modern American costumes and transposed into a modern world. In addition the cast was delivering the *cantica* (sung parts of the play) accompanied by gospel, blues or rap music. Names used by Plautus were all translated so as to render the puns they contained, and thanks to a close collaboration between the director and the translator, the staging was able to convey much of what was implicit in the original Latin text.

¹ The APGRD database may be consulted online: <http://www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk/asp/database.htm> Although one could arguably point out that a university-based archive is particularly likely to record university-based performances, only Plautus and Terence feature such an overwhelming disproportion between professional productions and student productions.

Below is a short excerpt from the translation, corresponding to lines 414-429 of Plautus' *Rudens*. In this scene the young prostitute Ampelisca (here translated as "Vinita") knocks at the door of the house to ask for water and is flirtatiously welcomed by the slave Scaeparnio (here "Shovelus"):

Shovelus: Who's that who's doing damage like that, getting violent with the front door?

Vinita: It's me. **Shovelus:** Whoa, what good thing is this? Dang, a woman, and not bad looking.

Vinita: Hello, young man. **Shovelus:** And a big hello to you, my dear young lady.

Vinita: I'm coming to see you. **Shovelus:** I'll roll out the welcome, if you'll come back this evening,

so I can make my bid: now there's no way I can make you a little present this morning --

but what do you say, pretty thing, sunshine? **Vinita:** Hey, a little too friendly

you got your hands there. **Shovelus:** Lord God almighty, she is the image of Venus.

Look at the joy in her little eyes; whoa, what kind of body is that --

brown as a buzzard -- I meant to say, brown as a berry.

And what kind of tits are those -- and what talent in that soul kiss.

Vinita: I'm not for sale to the neighborhood; can you kindly keep your hands off me?

Shovelus: Ain't it okay to touch you, pretty thing, nice and pretty like this?

Vinita: When there's time, then I'll pay attention to foolin around with you.

Now, the business I got sent for, I wish you'd either say yes or no.

Shovelus: What you want now? **Vinita:** A smart guy could tell what I want just from what I got.

Shovelus: Yeah, that smart guy could tell what *I* want from what *I* got.²

The general impression of the adaptation is extremely modern: it makes it sound as if the action was taking place in a contemporary American setting. In this respect, it does succeed in allowing today's audiences access to the play in a very immediate way – even though, as was pointed out by some critics, it is so precisely adapted to a particular type of audience and a particular period that it would hardly be stageable in a non-US context for example.³

² As Amy Richlin's translation is unfortunately unpublished at present this passage has kindly been provided by the author for this volume.

³ A point made by Vincent Hunink in his review of three Plautus translations by Amy Richlin, *Rome and the Mysterious Orient: Three Plays by Plautus, translated with introductions and notes*. Berkeley: University of

A comparable collaboration took place in France in 2001 and 2004, when classics professor Florence Dupont translated *Aulularia* and *Pseudolus* for two productions directed by Brigitte Jaques-Wajeman, first performed in the Louvre Museum in Paris, then at the Cartoucherie in Vincennes. While backed by the expertise of Florence Dupont, Brigitte Jaques-Wajeman declared her approach to be non-historical, giving a creative, contemporary version of ancient texts. However, unlike *Tug of War*, her *La Marmite* (*Aulularia*) and *Pseudolus* were not transposed into a specific contemporary context but were instead set in a fantasy world that featured elements alluding both to ancient times and to more contemporary realities. This allowed Jaques-Wayeman to adapt the play to modern performance conditions and customs and still give the audience a sense of its perennial, universal values.

Aside from universities and academic institutions, many ancient drama productions take place at archaeological sites, many of which organise specific festivals in the summer. The programmes of some festivals, however, showcase the general preference for Greek drama, particularly tragedies: understandably, this is the case in Greece, in the prestigious summer festival of Epidaurus to cite but one example. However, in the last few decades, Plautus' and, to a lesser extent, Terence's dramas were regularly performed in the ancient theatres of Syracuse, Segesta and Elea (Italy), Merida and Segobriga (Spain). Generally translated versions were staged in order to make the shows as widely accessible as possible. But the one place where Plautus lovers are guaranteed to see his plays regularly performed is the Northern-Italian town of Sarsina, which is known to be the Roman playwright's birthplace and has hosted an open-air theatre festival every July since 1956: although the programme usually consist of both ancient and modern plays, it contains at least a couple of Plautus' plays every season.⁴

California Press, 2005 (*Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, May 2006, 35, available online: <http://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2006/2006-05-35.html>).

⁴ Information on the festival may be found online on <http://www.plautusfestival.it/>

Presently, Plautus and Terence do not fully belong to the “classical” drama repertory, in the sense that they are not famous and respected enough by the general public to draw an audience automatically. Instead, their plays are generally performed to give audiences a better idea of what comedy was like in ancient times, or to make them discover important sources of inspiration for Shakespeare or Molière. These are generally the arguments put forward in the rare cases when professional institutions choose to put on plays by Plautus or Terence. In the BBC radio drama series that flourished from the late 1940s to the early 1980s, such a mass education purpose was clearly at stake. The BBC aired several English translations and adaptations of Roman comedies, such as *Pseudolus* in 1949, *Trinummus* in 1958, *Amphitryon* in 1961, *The Eunuch* in 1968, *Mostellaria* in 1969 and *The Pot of Gold* in 1980. This educational drive is even more obvious in the activities of companies like Theater Ludicrum (<http://ludicrum.homestead.com>). Director and classics teacher George Bistransin, has been regularly staging his own translations of Plautus’ plays at the Strand Theater of Dorchester (Massachusetts) since 1985, for an audience primarily consisting of Latin students.

Noteworthy exceptions are Peter Oswald’s translations of Plautus, particularly *The Haunted House*, staged by Polly Irvin at Bridge Lane Theatre, London, in 1994, and more recently *The Storm*, adapted from *Rudens* and performed at Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre in 2005. Although the latter production, directed by Tim Carroll, was purposely programmed alongside Shakespeare’s *Tempest* to emphasise the kinship of the two plays, it did not aim at reconstructing ancient drama following historical principles. Peter Oswald and Tim Carroll chose to put the main focus of the play on the prostitutes, shown under a much more trashy light than in Plautus’ original version, and to introduce various anachronistic, deconstructionist elements but to keep the metatheatrical spirit of Roman plays. The scenery thus included photographic images of the Parthenon, while the main actor sometimes commented upon the writing, apologising for the feeble gags or the weak plot of the play. Instead of trying to bridge the distance between ancient comedy’s codifications and the expectations of a contemporary audience, Oswald and Carroll chose to focus on this distance and play with it.

Roman Comedy Rewritten: Contemporary Versions of *Amphitruo*

Precisely because ancient comedy is composed in a way that does not necessarily correspond to the modern criteria of drama writing, it paradoxically appears easier to rewrite ancient plays altogether than to attempt translation or adaptation. Unlike the examples mentioned above, rewriting does not only consist of transposing the play to fit the taste of a modern audience: it involves changing the layout, and often part of the story, adding and taking out characters, and creating a new environment for interpretation. Reference to the original text and its author is then generally omitted and the new plays presented and perceived as a fully modern piece of work. Such rewrites are particularly abundant in the case of Plautus' *Amphitruo* which, after Rotrou, Molière and Kleist in previous centuries, still proves a fruitful source of inspiration for playwrights and film-makers in modern times. Modern authors' strong interest in *Amphitruo* is relatively easy to explain: unlike other Roman comedies, *Amphitruo* is based on Greek mythology and presents famous mythological characters such as Jupiter, Mercury, Amphitryon and Alcmene. In this, it is comparable to a tragedy and indeed the prologue of the play alerts us to the crossing of genres going on here (see Telo in this volume). In addition contemporary writers are much more inclined to rewrite a prominent myth than an unknown story. This is why *Amphitruo*, more than any other play by Plautus or Terence, inspired playwrights even after Roman comedy ceased to play a prominent part in general culture.

The most notable example of a twentieth century rewriting of Plautus' *Amphitruo* is French playwright Jean Giraudoux's *Amphitryon 38*, first performed in 1929 at the Comédie des Champs-Élysées in a production by Louis Jouvet. The title of the play corresponds to Giraudoux's approximation of how many modern versions Plautus' comedy had inspired before his own. The first in a series of plays by Giraudoux based on characters and episodes of ancient mythology, such as *The Trojan War Will Not Take Place* (1935), *Electra* (1937) and *The Apollo of Bellac* (1942), *Amphitryon 38* was translated into English in 1937 by Samuel Nathaniel Behrman for a production at the Shubert Theatre in New York. Like all of Giraudoux's mythology-inspired plays, *Amphitryon 38* presents itself as a mix between the ancient world and contemporary realities, as was illustrated in the

first production of the play by Louis Jouvet's stage design, combining classical Greek architecture with Cubist art. Plautus' story and characters are preserved, along with their ancient setting. However, Giraudoux profoundly transforms the original play when turning it into a romantic comedy: Sosia's role is drastically reduced, while Alcmena becomes the true heroine of the play, embodying pure, absolute human love. Indeed, the main focus of the play is put on the couple Amphitryon and Alcmena who are, presented in a noble and sympathetic light, far from their humorous portrait in Plautus' play as a cuckold and a shrew. Through them, Giraudoux celebrates the greatness of human love, put forward as the only state of perfection humanity is able to achieve. In contrast, the gods' ideal existence appears as insipid and monotonous: despite his immortality and far-reaching powers, Jupiter is miserable because he cannot have Alcmena's true love for himself, and as a result he spends the entire play envying Amphitryon's lot.

Giraudoux' new interpretation of Amphitryon's story brings about some changes in the general layout of the play. Because the emphasis is put on romance rather than deception, the play begins with a quiet, amorous contemplation of Alcmena by Jupiter. Fascinated by the true perfection of her love for her husband, Jupiter decides to sideline Amphitryon with a war and steal his place. Jupiter's divine nature, however, turns out to be an obstacle to his happiness. Mercury needs to give him some advice: Jupiter must make himself seem more vulnerable and more human in order for his impersonation of Amphitryon to become credible (act I, scene 5). For Jupiter tries in vain to convince Alcmena to welcome him and love him for what he is, a god (act II, scenes 2 and 5). When Mercury threatens her with severe punishments if she refuses to accept Jupiter as her lover, Alcmena manages to convince Leda, whom Jupiter had once ravished taking the shape of a swan, to swap places in the bedroom secretly (act II, scenes 6 and 7). In this respect, unlike what is happening in Plautus' play, Giraudoux's Jupiter fails to obtain what he is really aiming for: although he manages in the end, through deception, to sleep with Alcmena, the triumph of his victory is spoilt by her constant reassertion of her love and faithfulness to her husband (act I, scene 6). As a true Prometheus-figure, Alcmena rebels against Jupiter's hegemonic love and firmly rejects him as she would a common suitor, refusing to be corrupted by her human nature in spite of her attraction for the god. When they finally part at the

end of the play, Alcmena has clearly gained a position of control and offers Jupiter her friendship instead of the love he was begging for:

Jupiter: Here we are for the first time face to face, I know your virtue, and you know of my desire... Alone, at last!...

Alcmene: According to your reputation, you're often 'alone' this way, aren't you?

Jupiter: But rarely so in love, Alcmena, and never so weak. From no other woman would I have suffered this scorn. (...)

Alcmene: O Jupiter, do you really fancy me?

Jupiter: If the word fancy is not only about fancies, but also about shy deer or flowering almond-trees, then I fancy you, Alcmena.

Alcmene: This is my luck. If you disliked me the slightest bit, you would not hesitate to make love to me by force so as to take your revenge.

Jupiter: And do you fancy me?

Alcmene: How can you doubt it? Would it feel so much like cheating on my husband, with a god I loathe? Rape would be a disaster for my body, but I would preserve my honour.

Jupiter: Are you casting me aside because you love me? Are you resisting me because you are mine?

Alcmene: That's love.

Jupiter: You make the Olympic gods speak very weighty words today.

Alcmene: It won't harm them. People say that the most simple word from you, one single word, could destroy the world through its force.

Jupiter: Thebes doesn't risk anything today.

Alcmene: Then why should Alcmena risk anything? Why do you need to torture me, to break up a perfect couple, to leave ruins behind you for a moment of bliss?

Jupiter: That's love...

Alcmene: And what if I could offer you something better than love? You can make love to other women. But I would like to create a softer, but more powerful link between us: of all women I am the only one who can offer this to you. And I do offer it.

Jupiter: And what is this?

Alcmene: Friendship!

Jean Giraudoux, *Amphitryon* 38, act III, scene 6 (translated by the author)

While Plautus was emphasising the superiority of the gods, making Jupiter and Mercury appear as masterful deceivers, Giraudoux in contrast chooses to highlight the value and intensity of human love and provides a metaphysical background to Jupiter's amorous enterprise while creating a romantic, almost solemn atmosphere that contrasts with Plautus' farcical mood.⁵

Much lighter entertainment is Cole Porter's Broadway musical version of *Amphitruo* called *Out of This World*, which opened in New York at the New Century Theatre in December 1950. Despite featuring Broadway performers popular at the time such as George Gaynes as Jupiter, Charlotte Greenwood as Juno or William Redfield as Mercury, however, the production was only moderately successful. The libretto, written by Dwight Taylor and Reginald Lawrence, offered a very free adaptation of Plautus's play: it tells the story of a young couple, Helen and Art O'Malley, a journalist, who travel to Greece in search of a news story about a gangster and attract the attention of Jupiter. Mercury is sent to separate the newlyweds and arrange a meeting between Helen and Jupiter, who has taken Art's appearance. In spite of Juno's attempts to counter her husband's plans, Jupiter's deception succeeds, but when he reveals the truth to Helen and offers to take her to Mount Olympus, she chooses her mortal husband, in a way falling in line with Giraudoux's Alcmene. The end of the play sees the two worlds of gods and humans separating again and reestablishes the couples of Art and Helen on earth and Jupiter and Juno in heaven.

This was not the first time Cole Porter had adapted a classic into a musical: two years earlier, in 1948, *Kiss Me Kate*, his version of Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*, had been a major hit on Broadway defying all expectations,

⁵ As the critics did not fail to notice the play rather disappointed as comic entertainment and its Broadway premiere was only rescued by its leading couple Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne: "To provincial Lunt-Fontanne fans, *Amphitryon 38* was pretty much what the doctor ordered. [...] What first-nighters found they had paid for was a comedy written with a stylish stylus, a sort of Jovian musing, some heavy-handed Olympian plotting—and the Lunts. Just as all but the extremely myopic soon discovered that the display of buttockry in the startling opening set was a plaster hoax, so none but the most zealous Lunt-Fontanne champions found *Amphitryon 38* the perfect play." (review in *Time Magazine*, Monday Nov. 8, 1937, one week after the play's Broadway premiere at the Shubert Theatre).

which allowed Porter to command a hefty advance of half a million USD for his next show. Doris Day and Jo Stafford who also later recorded some of the show's songs (as did Frank Sinatra) premiered Cole Porter's score for *Out of this World* nationwide on CBS radio the night before the show's Philadelphia opening. However, maybe due to the contrast between the mythological subject of *Amphitryon*, from which contemporary audiences tend to expect some kind of profundity, and the frivolous, almost camp spectacle that was presented in the fashion of 1920's musicals, the show was generally not judged well by the critics ("Ten years ago it would have been a crashing hit") and did not have a very long run of 20 weeks on Broadway with 157 performances only and had lost USD 179 000 on a USD 200 000 investment. Even a brief excerpt from the lyrics of the musical's first song which follows the overture and the prologue, exemplifies this shift away from profundity:,:

I Jupiter, I Rex

Am positively teeming with sex....

I Jupiter, I Jove,

Would like a brand new dish on my stove.

I am tired of blasé goddesses

With busting out all over bodices

I crave a merry mortal with a sassy air

And a baby blue 32 brassier.

I Jupiter, I Rex

I Jupiter Rex

Am positively teeming, yes positively screaming for sex

I am tired of blasé goddesses

With busting out all over bodices

I crave a sassy mortal with a merry air

And a not too plump, bump to bump derriere

I Jupiter, I Rex

I Jupiter Rex

Am positively teeming, just positively steaming with sex,

Sex, sex, sex, sex, sex, sex, sex !

Porter showcases Jupiter's character as a sex-obsessed womaniser, which made him correspond to the conventions of vaudeville but may have seemed too daring to the audience at the time. Hasty reworking of the show – as well as occasional brushes with the censor's offices taking offence at the phrase “goosing me” in Juno's song “Nobody's Chasing Me” during the show's test run in the provincial theatres - did not help either. However, decades later in 1995 Porter's musical was produced again to great acclaim by Mark Brokaw at the New York City Center in concert performances highlighting Cole Porter's music rather than the dramaturgy and comic aspects of the show.

Not only has the story of *Amphitryon* inspired play-writers, but it also provided the subject for several films in the course of the twentieth century. As early as 1911, in the early times of cinema, French film director Etienne Arnaud produced *Amphitryon*, a silent short movie closely based on Plautus' comedy. In 1935, the same story was turned into a musical feature film directed by Reinhold Schünzel and Albert Valentin which was shot twice, successively with a German and then a French cast. Based on Plautus' play, the film also integrates elements from Molière and Kleist's adaptations (see the chapters on reception by Caniard and Hurka) such as the presence of an additional maidservant coupling up with Sosia. As a musical, it has some elements in common with Cole Porter's later adaptation, especially the musical style, but also a modern representation of the characters (Mercury, for example, wears roller skates) and its light, irreverent treatment of the original myth: the *Amphitryon* story is presented as a mere cuckold farce in which gods are not any different from men; one scene even shows the gods discovering statues of themselves and realising with great surprise how much men idealise them. The French and German titles of the movie, *Les Dieux s'amuse* (*Gods Having Fun*) and *Aus den Wolken kommt das Glück* (*Happiness Comes From The Sky*) aptly summarise the general effect of light amusement of this musical film.

A much more philosophical take, on the other hand, is Jean-Luc Godard's film version of *Amphitryon's* story, *Hélas pour moi* (*Alas For Me*), released in 1991. Clearly influenced by Giraudoux's *Amphitryon 38*, Godard's movie stars the same melancholic figure of a god falling in love with a woman

who refuses the immortality he has to offer. However, the film transposes Jupiter into “God” and, apart from the mysterious character called Max Mercure who accompanies him, Godard seems to drop mythological referencing altogether. Instead, Godard introduces some references to Christianity when he lets his main character say: “I once had a little boy, he gave his life for you.” Transposing the story of *Amphitryon* in a contemporary context, in which God falls in love with a beautiful woman called Rachel and borrows the features of her husband Simon Donnadiou (literally, “who gives to God”) so as to spend a night with her, Godard’s film presents itself as a philosophical meditation on the vulnerability of the Christian God in search for the love of humanity. Godard replaces the comic dimension of Plautus’ original play with a more meditative tone and a metaphysical agenda that uses the mythological dimension of Plautus’ *Amphitruo* as vehicle and leaves the story’s comic potential unexplored.

Making New Things Out of Old: Modern “Roman” Comedies

Paradoxically, much more faithful to the spirit of Roman comedy are musicals or sitcoms in which conventions, character types and plot elements from Plautus and Terence’s plays are recycled into contemporary formats. Although Roman plays are often not explicitly referenced in such productions, the inspiration they provide is still easily recognisable, all the more since the action of these musicals and sitcoms is normally situated in ancient Rome. They provide in a way an equivalent to Roman comedy’s relation to Greek New comedy as they recycle narrative patterns, roles and settings, often of several plays at once, to create new stories situated in a fantastical Rome, in the same way Plautus and Terence sometimes contaminated plays by Menander and set their storylines in Greece. In both cases, the setting of the plays obliges stereotyping and the author’s imagination rather than historical reality and provides a pretext for presenting an imaginary world where anything can happen, without the constraints of realism.

The best known and arguably the most successful example of this approach is Stephen Sondheim, Burt Shevelove and Larry Gelbart’s musical *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, first performed on Broadway in 1962 and turned into a musical film in 1966 which is still frequently staged all

over the English-speaking world.⁶ For the most part based on Plautus' *Pseudolus*, *Miles gloriosus* and *Mostellaria*, the play presents both plot and characters in perfect harmony with Plautine conventions. But the true genius of the show is to combine ancient comedy with references to popular American culture, particularly the humour of Jewish comedians starring in the show such as Zero Mostel, Phil Silvers and Jack Gilford. Some critics even dubbed the show as taking place in "Brooklyn-on-the-Tiber".⁷ The actors resorted, for the musical and subsequently for the film version, to the very acting skills and routines they were used to in their vaudevillian career.⁸ Both faithful to the spirit of Plautine plays and consistent with the expectations the general public hold of comedy, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* successfully exemplifies the possible transposition of Roman drama into contemporary comic models.

In this respect, the opening song ("Comedy Tonight") of Richard Lester's 1966 movie is emblematic of the remainder of the musical: sung by the slave Pseudolus - just as the prologues of Roman comedy were sometimes recited by a play's main slave character⁹ - it fits the principles of Roman comedy prologues as well as the customs of musical openings and of cinema theme songs. It mainly functions as an expository scene, presenting the streets of Rome as the general setting of the play, introducing the main characters plus offering a few taster images from the rest of the movie. In addition it provides a transition for the audience between their daily lives and the fictitious world they are about to enter: while the credits of the film are being displayed onscreen, Pseudolus is putting the audience into the right spirit for all the show's fun to come: "*Old situations, / New complications, / Nothing portentous or polite; / Tragedy tomorrow, / Comedy tonight!*" This emphasis put on the show's generic identity is comparable to Plautus' jokes in the prologue of *Amphitruo* (50-63), a play successively presented

⁶ Among the recent productions of this musical is the 1996 Broadway production directed by Jerry Zacks starring first Nathan Lane, and then Whoopi Goldberg as Pseudolus.

⁷ See the title of Malamud (2001).

⁸ See Malamud (2001) 198.

⁹ Cf. the prologues of Plautus' *Mostellaria* presented by the slave Tranio, and of *Amphitruo*, presented by Mercury dressed up as the slave Sosia.

as a tragedy and as a comedy. This helps to focus the attention of the audience onto the spectacle they are about to watch. In the same metatheatrical and self-ironic way the actor Zero Mostel switches back and forth between his slave role and his status as the star comedian playing the part.¹⁰

The characters of the show are on the whole faithful to the stereotypes of Roman comedy – some of them even bear names borrowed from across the Plautine corpus, such as Pseudolus, Lycus or Gymnasia.¹¹ The *paterfamilias* (head of the family) bears the significant name of Senex (“old man”) and is just as weak and lusty as some of the father figures in Roman comedy (Plautus’ Demaenetus in *Asinaria* or Demipho in *Mercator*). His wife, Domina (“mistress”) is dominant (who would have guessed) and sour-tempered and resembles Plautus’ Cleostrata (*Casina*) or the unnamed wife of Menaechmus I (*Menaechmi*); and, as if to reinforce the stereotype, she is only surpassed in harshness by her own mother, who briefly appears armed with a whip. The two main slaves, Pseudolus and Hysterium, are both dressed in orange, which evokes slave uniforms and is reminiscent of the red wig conventionally worn by Roman actors playing slaves. As soon as the show starts, a mute dice-playing scene characterises Pseudolus immediately as the clever slave who swindles everyone, whereas Hysterium presents himself as *seruus bonus* (good slave) ready to beat up his own mate to please his demanding mistress. He will, however, transform in the run of the play into Pseudolus’(unwilling) partner in crime. As for the young man in love, tellingly called Hero as to underline his function as the romantic male lead, he is as naïve and sappy as are his Roman counterparts such as Plautus’ Calidorus in *Pseudolus* or Terence’s Antipho in *Phormio*. In the film version he is played by a British actor, young Michael Crawford, whose plummy English accent not only marks his social standing above the slaves and the pimp, played by American comedians, but also helps to undermine comically the pathos in some of his

¹⁰ As he puts it when interrupting the theme song: “Pseudolus is probably my favourite character in the piece. A role of enormous variety and nuance, and played by an actor of such versatility, such magnificent range, such... Let me put it this way: I play the part.”

¹¹ Pseudolus is the name of the starring slave in Plautus’ play *Pseudolus*. Lycus that of the pimp in *Poenulus*, and the name Gymnasia reminds us of Gymnasium, the young prostitute in *Cistellaria*.

scenes: when Hero threatens to stab himself out of amorous despair, the audience can hear a caricature of Shakespearian tragic lovers.

In addition to borrowing Roman comedy's comic stereotypes, several scenes appear to bear direct reference to passages from Roman plays. One scene in particular, in which the slave Hysterium makes the old neighbour Erronius believe that his house is haunted in order to keep him away, is directly borrowed from Plautus' *Mostellaria*, in which the slave Tranio tells his old master Theopropides that his son had to abandon their house because it was haunted by evil spirits (Plautus, *Most.*, 446-531). Also, although in a less obvious way, the brothel scene in which the pimp introduces his prostitutes to Hero and Pseudolus is reminiscent of a passage of *Pseudolus* in which the *leno* Ballio reviews his troupe of girls and points out the talents of each one (Plautus, *Pseud.*, 185-229). The denouement of the show, with the recognition scene of Erronius and his long-lost children, Miles Gloriosus and Philia, who had been kidnapped by pirates in their infancy, copies similar conventional endings in a significant proportion of Roman plays. Plautus' *Captivi*, *Casina*, *Curculio*, *Epidicus*, *Poenulus* and *Rudens*, as well as Terence's *Andria*, *Phormio* and *Hecyra* all end with a recognition scene. And finally the songs of the musical fulfil a function similar to the *cantica* in Plautus and Terence's plays, as they create a pause in the action and help to characterise the play's personae: the young lovers with the song "Lovely" or the braggart soldier with his tune "Bring Me My Bride". They reveal a further similarity between Broadway musicals and Roman comedy, which both often prioritise putting on a spectacle over general plot design.

All those features tend to indicate a deep familiarity of the show's and the movie's writers with Plautus' and Terence's works, and their concern to produce close equivalents to Roman comedy. This, however, does not prevent the show from altering some important details, in particular regarding the slave figures who, unlike their Roman models, actively pursue their freedom - probably so as to suit the modern disapproval of slavery. One might also point out that the Miles Gloriosus (literally "braggart soldier") from the musical appears to be a truly strong, fearful, and even seductive soldier, much unlike Plautus' and Terence's *milites* (soldiers) who were mere pretenders., His triumphal entry with

the song “Bring Me My Bride”, interpreted by the professional opera singer Leon Greene with his powerful baritone, produces a striking impression of military vigour. This choice may easily be explained by the producers’ drive to highlight the parodic elements of the movie, above all parodies of the spectacular military scenes of epic historical drama films. The final chariot chase in particular clearly references William Wyler’s famous *Ben Hur* movie, released just a few years earlier. In the same way as Roman comedy habitually refers to the related genre of tragedy (see Telo and Christenson in this volume) this movie adaptation makes fun of related movie genres and remains faithful to the spirit and entertainment purpose of Roman comedy.

The tremendous success of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* soon inspired similar shows that looked back to ancient comedy – now back in fashion. The most famous of these is probably the British television comedy series *Up Pompeii* (1969-1970) which itself gave rise to a film directed by Bob Kellett (1971), and more recently to a stage play produced by Bruce James (2011). In casting Frankie Howerd in the main role of the slave Lurcio, who had been acclaimed as Pseudolus in the London production of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* in 1963-1965, the show clearly followed into the footsteps of the American musical.¹² Set in pre-eruption Pompeii, the *Up Pompeii* sitcom uses similar role types and plot patterns to the earlier musical/movie and added also a whiff of history with occasional references to the emperor Nero (AD 54-68). Each episode commenced with a metatheatrical prologue spoken into the camera by Frankie Howerd. Since the show was recorded in a studio in front of a live audience, the reactions of spectators were directly audible. These were also regularly solicited by frequent asides and off-the-cuff remarks of Frankie Howerd who commented upon the sitcom’s action with puns and anachronisms, systematising a theatrical device that could already be found in Plautus’ and Terence’s plays as well as in the Broadway musical. Nevertheless the sitcom fails to reach the variety and richness of its musical counterpart: parodies seems less clever and the humour, largely influenced by the

¹² Another indication of that link between these two shows is that Michael Horden, who played Hero’s father Senex in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, also plays the father in the 1971 film *Up Pompeii*.

spirit and the gags of Gerald Thomas' *Carry On* movies, particularly *Carry On Cleo* (1964), a parody on Mankiewicz's movie *Cleopatra* (1963), focuses mostly on saucy situations. This results in a simplistic, occasionally even coarse adaptation of Roman comedy's stereotypes and conventions which propagates an image of ancient Rome as a culture of swindle and debauchery. While *A Funny Thing* could be considered a modern rewriting of Plautine drama, *Up Pompeii* is a sitcom for which Roman plays worked as a remote inspiration, even though the name of Plautus is regularly evoked by the main slave character.

These last few examples link easily with Roman plays thanks to their ancient setting and explicit allusions to ancient drama. Less clearly identifiable are the influences of Plautus and Terence on contemporary comedy or humour writing, largely because they are generally mediated through several intermediaries such as early-modern comedy or vaudeville. As we have seen in the chapters of Manuwald, Kretschmer, Candiard and Hurka in this volume, over several centuries Roman comedy stood model for European comedy, its character stereotypes and plot patterns, its prominent servants and preference for romance, and use of metatheatricality. In this way, the influence of Roman comedy is continuing up to the present day in the performing arts and even more widely in literature, although not necessarily as clearly references as in the examples discussed above. When P. G. Wodehouse, in his short stories and novels, gave Jeeves, the butler, playful superiority over his young master Bertie Wooster, he might not have been thinking directly of Plautus' cunning slaves, but their literary influence was still felt through more modern models such as Arlequin or Figaro.¹³ Indeed, despite his matchless refinement which makes him a unique figure, Jeeves combines qualities already found in Plautus' and Terence's slaves: not only is he more intelligent than his master, but he also has expertise in the social codes of all circles of life, which allows him to take on all sorts of disguises comparable to those assumed by the slaves of ancient comedy. The repetitive plot patterns of the Jeeves novels and short stories - Bertie getting in trouble despite Jeeves' tactful warning, the predicament reaching a critical point and Jeeves elegantly saving the

¹³ See for example *My Man Jeeves* (1919), *The Inimitable Jeeves* (1923), *Very Good, Jeeves!* (1930) or *The Mating Season* (1949). The writing of the Jeeves stories went on until the 1970s with *Much Obligated, Jeeves* (1971), published shortly before the author's death.

day – are also comparable to the recurrent storylines of Roman plays. These recurrences were canonised, in accordance with the principles of sitcom, in the novels' television adaptation by Clive Exton (1990-1993), with Stephen Fry as Jeeves and Hugh Laurie as Bertie..

In the same way the Roman audiences had internalised the codes of comedy and were in all likelihood more sensitive towards code variations rather than the ever so slightly repetitive standard plot and characters of the plays, viewers watching *Bugs Bunny* already know that Elmer will not succeed in killing Bugs and will have been mocked by him a thousand times by the end of each episode: they rather wonder how this repetitive pattern will give birth to new entertainment which happens mostly through inventive gags and the use of parody. In that way, rather than seen as a direct influence, Roman comedy constitutes a major archetype in the long tradition of Western comedy that contrasts with the neo-Aristotelian model that imposed unified plots and psychologised characters onto European drama in the early-modern period.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Roman comedy ceased to be part of common cultural knowledge of the educated public and became part of a specialised scholarly culture. This explains why Plautus and Terence are rarely staged outside academic contexts, or at least without academic initiative – though some companies are producing daring adaptations aiming to make the plays accessible to a wider public. Among the corpus of Roman comedy, *Amphitruo* in particular seems to have been favoured. Benefitting from its mythological characters and setting, it tends to be ranked next to Greek tragedies and has inspired several adaptations into plays, musicals and even films. The rest of the Plautine corpus profited from the initiative of Stephen Sondheim, Burt Shevelove and Larry Gelbart to combine elements from several Roman plays to a very Plautine Broadway musical. The huge success of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* highlights the similarities between ancient comic conventions and modern practice, particularly in musical comedy, which presents the same alternation between spoken and sung passages as the *diuerbium* and *canticum* of Roman plays. More generally, although direct references to Plautus' and Terence's works are rare in today's

shows, many a light comedy on stage, popular comedy in cinema or sitcom and cartoon on television regularly parade their ancient ancestors.

Further reading

It could be stimulating for students and scholars to compare the academic editions and translations of Plautus and Terence available in university libraries to those adaptations intended for the stage, such as Amy Richlin's three Plautus plays (2005) and Peter Oswald's version of *Rudens*, *The Storm* (2006). Although several books survey the portrayal of ancient Greece and Rome in cinema, most of them remain focused on ancient history and only few address the question of comedy. Among the latter are Jon Solomon's study (2001), particularly pp. 283-305, which compares screen adaptations of with other comic films on Antiquity, and also Margaret Malamud's 2001 article on *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. Among the several rewritings of Plautus' *Amphitruo* mentioned in this chapter, only Giraudoux's *Amphitryon 38* is available in print and English translation (1967). Cole Porter's *Out of This World* and Jean-Luc Godard's *Hélas pour moi* are analysed respectively in Ethan Mordden's study on Broadway musicals (2007) and in Richard Brody's study on Godard (2008), particularly pp. 545-565. As for the similarities of Wodehouse's Jeeves and Tex Avery's cartoons with Plautus' and Terence's plays, they do not seem to have been investigated thoroughly in any printed work, but further details on their legacies, organisation and use of parody can be found in the general studies by Richard Usborne (1981) and Floriane Place-Verghnes (2006).