

## Beyond the *OCT*: Reflections on the NEH Summer Institute on Roman Comedy in Performance

When a modern audience sits down to watch a play, the spectators expect an immersive experience. We leave the theater discussing the acting, the set, and the costumes, but not necessarily the script. If we do reflect upon the particular words we have heard, we are more likely to remember the pithy one-liners and punch lines than the intricacies of the dramatic dialogue. Given our experience with modern theater, it seems odd that our discussions of the comedies of Plautus and Terence often focus primarily (and sometimes exclusively) on the text without taking into account the broader context of the performance. Inspired by the panelists' experience at the NEH Summer Institute on Roman Comedy in Performance, this panel discusses discoveries we made when staging scenes from Plautus and Terence, particularly those discoveries that go beyond the received texts.

The panel opens with a broad look at how the festival context of Roman comedy influences our reception of a particular performance, and then we consider how interventions in the ancient text may help a modern audience come to terms with aspects of the ancient text that may be unsettling. Because a play's performance involves more than reading a script aloud, the third and fourth papers explore the way that silent characters shape the action and affect the audience's perception of the speaking characters. The final paper focuses on the way that masks guide the choices we make when staging a scene. The panel will feature short staged readings of scenes from the Institute, as well as video clips of the official Institute performances. We will conclude with an extensive question-and-answer session, so we can elaborate on specific points of interest, and so audience members can share their own perspectives on Plautine and Terentian comedy in performance. It is our hope that this time will inspire scholars not only to reflect upon

their own practice, but also inspire them to adopt new approaches when presenting Roman comedy before a modern audience.

Through the consideration of these topics, we hope to promote and facilitate further performance of Plautine and Terentian comedy, both inside and outside the classroom. By incorporating performance into the teaching of Roman comedy, we make unexpected discoveries and encourage our students to grapple with what made this genre so popular with its original audiences. And by presenting ancient comedies to modern audiences, we encourage the spectators to reflect upon the fascinating (and sometimes horrifying) similarities between the Roman world and our own.

## Pseudolus at the *Ludi Megalenses*: Re-creating Roman Comedy in Context

The Games of the XXX Olympiad just ended, and we are missing the thrill of the victory and the agony of defeat. We are missing the pomp, the spectacle, the total package of entertainment that only public *ludi* can provide. What can we do to fill this gap in our entertainment? In this paper I will report on the first attempt to re-create the *Ludi Megalenses* with a *ludus scaenicus* at my institution in April 2013. Students and faculty will study and reenact some of the known rituals associated in antiquity with the worship of the Magna Mater at her new temple on the Palatine (dedicated in April 191, according to the *didascalia*), and will perform a staged-reading of Plautus' comedy *Pseudolus*. I chose this play not only because it is one of Plautus' best (and most produced), but also because the premier performance of this play is dated with certainty to the dedication of the temple to the Magna Mater. *Pseudolus* can be described as a "tour de force, appropriate for the extraordinary occasion" (Moore 1998).

The festival re-creation and staged reading will be integrated into my general education course "Greek and Roman Comedy," but will also involve the efforts of students in Eta Sigma Phi and the Classics Club, as well as interested parties from other departments (theatre, dance, and music). My participation in the 2012 NEH Summer Institute gave impetus to the endeavor and laid the groundwork. During the Institute we grappled with questions of text and metatheatricality, theatrical and sacred space, actors, music, movement, costumes (including masks), authenticity, audience reception, and occasion. We produced and filmed scenes from several plays of Plautus and Terence, clips of which will be studied during preparation for the re-creation and performance. Participants in our upcoming re-creation will research what took place during the six days of the ancient festival (ours is shorter) and will grapple with the significance

of political events surrounding the performance of *Pseudolus* at the *Ludi Megalenses* of 191, held only a decade after the defeat of Hannibal, when Rome was engaged in two other wars as well as slave revolts in Etruria. Thus, the re-creation of the festival as a setting for the production of a reading of *Pseudolus* establishes an historical context often lost in modern performance of ancient comedy.

Why re-create a Roman festival? Mary Kay Gamel and others have pressed academia to think of performance as scholarship. Like a science experiment, performance provides a laboratory for learning about ancient ritual and theatre practice. There is much that we do not know about the *Ludi Megalenses* and *scaenici*. A re-creation allows us to gain a unique historical perspective by “living history,” as, say, the Civil War re-enactor does. The benefits of “living history” in this case are especially significant due to the performative nature of the genre of ritual and drama. Modern performances of Roman comedy and re-creations of ritual reveal their complexities in a way that intellectualizing cannot.

The mission of the NEH Institute explains that by both studying and performing Roman comedy we can begin to explore “how a genre that is so incredibly fun can also sometimes be so troubling” (Website). The driving questions that motivated the institute have inspired my re-creation, namely: “Would Romans have responded the same way we do to scenes we find funny or disturbing? What effects would aspects of performance have on how those scenes were received? What do these ancient plays have to say to our own society?” (Website)

Recent events in the US reveal the continuity (and change) regarding reception of Roman jokes involving rape, torture of slaves, castration, and prostitution. Comedians like Sarah Silverman, Daniel Tosh, and Louis C.K. defend them. Movies such as *Date Night* contain subtle (or not so subtle, depending on the viewer’s attentiveness) rape jokes. Performance of Roman

plays in context provides a learning space where participants can grapple with these sensitive issues. As C.W. Marshall notes, “productions are experiments, testing hypotheses about ancient performance, allowing [the director/scholar/teacher] to corroborate and modify conclusions that would otherwise have remained theoretical” (Marshall 2006). Let us combine scholarship and performance whenever we can, when we teach. After all, the Romans set the stage, so to speak, for historical re-enactment. Let the *Ludi* begin!

Works Cited:

Moore, Timothy J. 1998. *The Theater of Plautus: Playing to the Audience*. Austin.

Marshall, C.W. 2006. *The Stagecraft and Performance of Roman Comedy*. Cambridge.

Website: <http://nehsummer2012romancomedy.web.unc.edu/the-institute-in-a-nutshell/>

## Devised Theater and Metatheater: The “Actor” as Commentator on Roman Comedy

For all the pleasure that Plautine comedy can afford a contemporary audience in the classroom and performance, the norms of Roman society refracted through the plays often pose morally troubling obstacles to that enjoyment. While recent historicist scholarship has addressed the prevalence in Roman comedy of slavery, rape, prostitution, and venomous marital discord (e.g. James 2010; Rei 1999; Parker 1989), such work increases intellectual understanding without necessarily alleviating the emotional discomfort that inhibits the openness to laughter that comedy requires. This paper suggests a method of defusing that discomfort through “devised theater” (Oddey 1994; Milling and Haddon 2005). Through this collaborative technique, students and actors can grapple with the disjunction of ancient and modern norms by revising, reorganizing, and/or intervening in the text to voice their concerns. Specifically, the use of “breakout scenes” formulated through devising permits the clear juxtaposition of critical debates with the received script. Devised theater can be viewed as a twentieth-century variation on the kind of collaborative, improvisational work postulated for Atellan farce and its contribution to Plautine comedy (Marshall 2006); the breakout scene, as a post-modern take on Plautine metatheatricality.

To demonstrate the practice and value of devised theater for actors and audience in an academic setting, I will screen an excerpt of a version of the *Pseudolus* scene from the NEH Institute modeled on the Split Britches Theater Company’s production of *Alcestis* (Hamilton 1993). Professor Elizabeth Patterson (Department of Theater, Elon University) directed our five-member group in scripting a breakout scene that articulated the moral, historical, and social issues underlying our interpretation of the scene, based upon our discussions in rehearsal. The scene functioned as an intervention in the Plautine script in which we each played a version of

ourselves, *as if* in rehearsal, breaking the illusion of performance while performing our critique. Thus the audience was both drawn in by the apparent dropping of the actor's mask, and encouraged to occupy a position of critical distance in engaging with the morally problematic issues of the scene—all in a comic vein. Thus we embodied the observation of Marshall 2006 that Plautine stagecraft regularly creates a third persona for the individual on stage: in addition to the actor himself and the character he plays, there is now an “actor”, who may speak not quite as the character bounded by the world of the play, nor give voice to his own personal thoughts off the cuff, but from an intermediary position designed to engage the audience. By shifting into a scripted discussion of the scene “in rehearsal” yet within the performance, the devised breakout scene meets Christenson's definition of metatheater: “the moves a playwright makes to draw attention to her/his play's status as a theatrical construct, regardless of whatever other motives might accompany these moves” (2012, pace Rosenmeyer 2002; Batstone 2005).

This incorporation of devised theater into the study and performance of Roman comedy yields multifarious pedagogical and artistic benefits. First, the act of fashioning a scripted response to the moral issues inherent in Roman comedy presents students and actors with a venue for articulating their reactions in conversation with their peers while pushing them to grapple with changes in social mores over time, an excellent exercise for engaging critical thinking skills and an entrée to dramaturgy. Second, the juxtaposition of received and devised scripts raises the issue of the relationship between script, transcript, and improvisation in Plautine comedy, and encourages students and actors to take ownership of the received text to experiment with the terms of that debate. Third, the collaborative process of devising, and resultant active posture toward the received text, expose the kind and degree of research that turn a performance from play-acting into scholarly activity.

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“There are no small parts, only small actors”:  
Spotlighting the Mute Characters of Roman Comedy

When we read and teach the plays of Plautus and Terence, it is all too easy to overlook the mute characters. These are the “extras” – the silent slaves, cooks, courtesans, and other lowly creatures of comedy that lurk in the background. Without any lines, they are all but invisible on the page. Only when we see them on a stage, do we realize how profoundly they can impact a scene.

In the first part of this paper, I present a pedagogical strategy for spotlighting these mute characters and exploring their comedic potential. I describe an exercise, modeled on our “performance labs” at the NEH Summer Institute, in which groups of students perform the same scene with some variation. Each group is given different instructions about how to play the mute characters. They might be asked, for example, to represent them as inanimate props. They might also be asked to give them large, colorful personalities akin to cartoon characters. The students are instructed to look for evidence of stage directions in the texts, to block out the scene, to perform in front of their peers, to be a supportive audience in turn, and to discuss their reactions afterward. The goal of the exercise is to encourage them to read between the lines and to think about the text as a performance.

In the second part of this paper, I will present four case studies based on my own scene-work and those of my colleagues at the NEH Summer Institute. I will show a few short video clips depicting mute characters at play (i.e. the courtesans in *Pseudolus* 133-234, the *lorarii* in *Truculentus* 775-854, the cooks in *Mercator* 691-802, and the “band of rogues” in *Eunuchus* 739-816). Building on the work of scholars such as Anne Groton (1995) and George Fredric Franko, who have exploited the comedic potential of silent characters to hilarious effect in their

own productions of Roman comedy, I will discuss how the mute characters dramatically affect the tone of each scene, often stealing the show.

Works Cited:

Groton, Anne. 1995. "[Rhyme, Women, and Song](#)." *Didaskalia* 2(3)

## Silent and Boisterous Slaves: Considerations in Staging *Pseudolus* 133-234

Working through a scene with an eye to performance has great pedagogical merit in helping students think about the multiple possibilities of a Plautine script. Goldberg (2004) has reminded us that these scripts are “less a thing in [themselves] than a reminder of that other, bigger thing that was the play” (385). As directorial work by a variety of scholars (e.g. Anne Groton, Mary-Kay Gamel, and Fred Franko) and the recent NEH Institute demonstrate, the same scripts of Plautus can lead to vastly different kinds of performances.

If we look at Ballio’s opening *canticum* in *Pseudolus*, we are immediately confronted with crucial directorial decisions that will impact the way that the audience receives Ballio and the play as a whole. As Moore (1998) has discussed, the way that characters build rapport with the audience has a tremendous impact on their success or failure within the play. Though the vast majority of the lines in this scene are delivered by Ballio, the action of the silent house slaves as well as the asides between Pseudolus and Calidorus provide interesting opportunities for the audience to think about who Ballio is. If we turn to the silent slaves first, we have to ask ourselves what those silent actors will *do* while on stage. How will they react to Ballio’s persistent physical and verbal abuse? Will they mock him? Undermine his authority by not reacting at all? Overreact and take the scene in a farcical direction? Or will they act truly terrified, taking the scene in a darker direction?

At the NEH Institute, our group opted to play this scene using only two actors as house slaves. Early in the scene, Ballio pushes and shoves his slaves around to set the tone for his mastery over them, but as the scene progresses, he begins to change his approach to them. When he threatens them with a whip (152-155), he never cracks his whip. Instead, he drags it across the shoulder of one of the prone slaves slowly, perhaps even sensually. This is not a whipping but a

kind of sadistic mime of whipping, a playful intimation of many beatings to come and a reminder of many gone by. Our Ballio then sits on one poor slave's back, as if to show the audience how exhausting it is to constantly dominate and abuse. Through the reactions of the silent slaves, the audience is encouraged to see Ballio as firmly in control of his own household, even if he was frustrated in his slave's inability to perfectly carry out his orders.

The relationship between Calidorus and Pseudolus provided an interesting foil in our staging. In the first aside (194-195a), Calidorus bursts out in frustration, but Pseudolus manages to control his master, encouraging him to see what Ballio will do next. The tables are turned here as the slave is the one who must guide the master. In the second aside (201-209), Calidorus again bursts out in frustration, and this time Pseudolus gives into the excitement as he harangues the youth of Athens for enduring a pestilence like Ballio. We decided to highlight the power reversal common among Plautine *servi callidi*. As Pseudolus rants about the failure of the youth, he takes a wide circle around the stage, catching the notice of Ballio. Calidorus trails after his slave, unable to catch him until Pseudolus has finished his rant. While the eyes of Ballio's silent slaves were perpetually on their master, Pseudolus temporarily ignores his, looking everywhere on stage except where his master is. In fact, Calidorus echoes the watchful attentiveness of the silent slaves as he constantly turns to Pseudolus as his authority for how to proceed against Ballio.

By putting *Pseudolus* 133-234 on stage, we were able to explore the way that physical movement reinforces ideas present in the script that has survived from antiquity. The body language of Ballio's silent slaves establishes a visual vocabulary of what authority looks like. Constantly watching Ballio out of fear, they establish Ballio's presence as a figure to pay attention to. In contrast, the exuberance of Pseudolus has the opposite effect. Through the second

aside, he cements the fact that Calidorus is not a character who will garner much attention from the audience. It is Pseudolus, in this duo, who exhibits authority.

Works Cited:

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## A Mask is Worth a Thousand Words

In the process of adapting and preparing our version of *Pseudolus* 133-234, our group discovered that masks are critical to understanding many aspects of a performance, including authenticity, humor, metatheater, and status transactions. This paper will share our group's insights on the importance of masks for Roman comedy, will suggest ideas for future performances, and will illustrate the power of the mask through short staged readings and video clips from our NEH production.

First, the question of whether to use masks at all when staging Roman comedy raises the issue of authenticity: is it important to replicate this particular aspect of the original performance? Masks certainly help emphasize certain types of Plautine humor. And since masks can differ dramatically, the type of mask used (i.e., full-head, full-face, half-masks, or even less naturalistic forms) can also affect the performance. Our decision to use half-masks from the *dell'arte* tradition influenced the final product, since the masks themselves shaped our translation and staging. For example, our Ballio was modeled on the traditional *Pulcinella* character, while one particularly dumb slave was based on the *Dottore* mask.

Similarly, masks bring life and humor to every character—even the silent ones. Plautine humor is not simply verbal, but may spring from comic business/busy-ness, from the actions of characters speaking or silent (see the other papers on this panel), or from particular exploitation of a mask's shape and expression (see, e.g., Marshall 2006: 134-6). In addition, the clear distinction between a masked persona and an unmasked actor allows for explicitly metatheatrical play with the concept of actor and character, as we demonstrated with an external 'commentary' scene during which several actors removed their masks and momentarily dropped their theatrical

personas. This scene allowed us to question how much a mask really does shape an actor's behavior.

Next, masks also helped us bring out issues of status (defined by Marshall 1993: 57 as follows, "Status expresses a relationship between any two characters, one of which will always be 'higher' than the other, who is then designated as of 'lower status.' The difference need not be great: good friends, for instance, will often have almost equal status. Nevertheless, the status is always present and always changing" as characters speak to each other and interact). Our attention to the various characters' status led us to imagine the scene in a different manner than the other groups had. In particular, our performance undermined Ballio nearly constantly (by means of specific actions and—more generally—by making the pimp female), while other groups took the threats uttered by Ballio much more seriously. Furthermore, differences in status could also be seen among the three slave characters, which created another opportunity for humor and stage business. Our use of masks also allowed us to depict Calidorus and Pinky (i.e., Phoenicium) as similar—and hence deservedly linked—characters, but simultaneously depicted them as puppets who were controlled by other, more powerful figures. In this way our performance demonstrated that, when used wisely, a mask can indeed be worth a thousand words, as it promotes humor, influences staging, and inspires metatheatrical play.

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