Dances to Flute Music and Obscene Verse. It's Roman Theater, Everybody: Crash Course The

Crash Course: Theater
https://youtube.com/watch?v=P05G89hgrPI
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/P05G89hgrPI

Hey, there. I'm Mike Rugnetta. This is Crash Course Theater, and today we're leaving Greece and moving on to Rome. Some of you are also hoping that we're leaving the phalli behind, but not a chance.

Roman theater looks a lot like Greek theater...or at least the comedy does. And also some of the tragedy. And the mime.

As for why this is the case, part of the blame goes to Alexander the Great, who disseminated the Greek theatrical tradition throughout the lands he conquered. I guess that's what happens when Aristotle is your private tutor.

This doesn't mean Rome couldn't and didn't create original entertainment, like gladiator battles and copulating animals and nude miming prostitutes and dwarves who chased women with clubs.

And we're gonna get to all of that, but first we're gonna trace the development of Roman theater, noticing how it borrows from Greek theater, especially late Greek comedy. And then we're gonna look at how plays and production evolved from there.

[Opening music]

After losing the Peloponnesian War, it's not that bad in Athens, but the Golden Age of theater is pretty much over. No great tragedian, like Aeschylus or Sophocles or Euripides shows up. Which we know in part because festival operators made a new rule: old plays could be revived. And while these were boom times for comedy, the wild days of Aristophanes are definitely over.

But as the theater gets less exciting, it also becomes increasingly admired and professionalized. Actors, who used to be looked down upon, get treated better and even organize into a guild. There are more opportunities for theater than ever before, with more and more festivals and theater-related civic opportunites.

But politically and socially, this was a much more conservative period, and that meant comedy had to change. The early plays of Aristophanes were extremely lewd and mentioned rulers by name. But once Athens starts tanking the war, that kind of stuff doesn't go over so well.

So Aristophanes makes his characters more general and cuts down on chorus size and spectacular effects. A late-ish play like *Lysistrata* doesn't mention politicians by name. And believe it or not, *Lysistrata* is relatively couth.

This possibly set the template for the genre known as middle comedy, which lasted from about 400 BCE to 323 BCE. We don't know for sure because no plays of middle comedy survive. This possibly means they weren't that funny. The more popular the play, the more it gets copied, and the better the chances of its survival. Sort of like how *Look Who's Talking Too* never made it to Blu-Ray.

New comedy, which is what the Romans will eventually create, gets going around 323 BCE with the death of Alexander the Great, and it lasts until around 260 BCE.

Menander is the writer that we associate with new comedy, partly because he was apparently really, really great at it, and partly because his works survive. Not entirely, though we do have some long fragments... of four of them. He wrote 100 plays. Ugh, papyrus, so flammable, so crumbly, so lost to history.

The plays of new comedy are less absurd than those of old comedy and middle comedy, and also less obscene – no padded buttocks and, get this, no phalli. I know, right? Is this even comedy?

Gods and goddesses are mostly absence. Plays are about fathers and sons and mothers and virgins, vain soldiers, and wily slaves. At this point democracy had ended, and it wasn't safe to criticize kings and emperors, so the problems are smaller and the situations are more realistic.

They're so realistic that one ancient critic said Menander's plays were indistinguishable from everyday experience, writing, "Menander or life, which imitated which?" Which is impressive when you consider that Menander's plays were still being performed entirely by dudes wearing weird hair masks.

Just as Greek comedy winds down, Roman comedy gets its start.

Livy, an awesome historian of ancient Rome, writes a hefty book between 27 and 9 BCE. And according to him, Roman theater evolves in five stages: dances to flute music; obscene improvisational verse and dances to flute music; medleys of dances to flute music; comedies with story lines and sections of lyric poetry to be sung; and comedies with story lines and song with an additional, often comedic, performance to be tacked onto the end.

Dances to flute music, I mean, sure, but let's talk about this obscene improvisational verse, am I right?

Livy describes a form called the Atellan farce, named for the town of Atella in Campania. Drawing on a type of lewd mime performed by actors called "phyliacs" or "phlyakes" or maybe "phlyaxes". The internet, and therefore we, are not sure.

Atellan farce involves actors improvising comedy based on stock characters, like a bragging soldier and a pompous doctor. Yes, with fake phalli, but you should really stop bringing this up because it's starting to get a little weird.

At the same time that Atellan farce was delighting the people of Campania, there were some competing forms, like the Etruscan practice of versus fescennini, which were jokey, very obscene poems recited at exactly the place you would expect to encounter that sort of thing: the harvest festival.

When versus fescennini gets combined with music and dancing, it produces a form called the fabula saturae. "Fabula" means "story", "saturae" means "full dish". And it's performed by actors/singers/dancers called histriones, which is where we get the English word "histrionic".

But maybe Atellan farces were funnier, because they're the genre that survives longer.

Eventually, the improvised situations get codified and written down and made into plays, and wow are these plays vulgar. If Yorrick had flesh, he would blush. Isn't that right, Slim?

Not every form is quite so dirty, though. In the late 3rd century BCE and early 2nd century BCE, a new kind of comedy appears, the fabula palliata. Though, maybe "new" isn't the best way to describe it.

A "palliata" refers to a cloak, and so either these plays were named for loose cloaks that the actors wore or the plays themselves were loosely cloaked versions of Greek originals.

Yes, they were in Latin, but they featured Greek characters in Greek settings and were ripped off pretty much wholesale from the plays of Menander. So that cloak, pretty loose. More of a shawl, really.

Now, maybe you're thinking, "Hey, that sounds a lot like plagiarism."

And yes, it does. But let's not forget that Roman culture was pretty fond of Greek culture, and celebrated responding to and engaging with ancient sources has its own kind of originality. Think of Virgil's *Aeneid*.

The fabulata palliata mostly rip off new comedy, chiefly the plays of Menander and a couple of his rivals whose plays are lost.

The two playwrights who do this the most successfully are Plautus and Terence. We'll discuss them next time, when we take a closer look at the surviving literature of the Roman theater. And spoiler alert: there's not a lot of it.

Oh, and I should also mention that there were original plays called fabula praetexta, Roman plays about Romans, but no one seems to have liked them that much. They didn't even get a LaserDisc release.

Now let's turn to Roman theater in production, in the Thought Bubble.

In our episode on the origins of Greek theater, we discussed how one of the festivals honoring Dionysus became the first home for Greek tragedy. Something similar happens in Rome.

In the late 6th century BCE, the dictator Tarquin establishes the ludi Romani, or "Roman games". This was a festival honoring Jupiter, who seems like a way less fun god to honor than Dionysus.

Now, even in its early manifestation, this festival apparently included less tearing apart of animals and more ordinary kinds of fun, like games and eventually chariot races.

In the middle of the century, Rome suffered a terrible plague, and at that point theatrical performances seem to have been added as a way to cheer up the people and maybe chill out some theater-loving gods.

But it isn't until 240 BCE that drama is formally added to the festival. And it probably wouldn't surprise you that these early dramas weren't exactly original. The first play was by Livius Andronicus, a Greek slave who basically just translated a Greek play.

Once plays are added to more and more festivals, they're referred to as ludi scaenici.

Production was a little different in Rome than in Greece. Plays don't seem to have held the same associations of civic duty and civic virtue. Instead, theater was almost immediately professionalized.

A person known as an aedile or a praetor would take charge of the festival and hire a dominus gregis to supply the play or plays. The dominus gregis would buy a play, hire a mix of slave and free actors to act it, and arrange masks and props and probably at least a couple of flutes.

Thank you, Thought Bubble.

While actors in post-classical Greece had improved their status, the same thing definitely couldn't be said of actors in Rome. Acting was not a respectable thing to do.

Actors couldn't vote, they couldn't serve in the military, they couldn't hold office, and if they gave a bad performance they could be punished, possibly by death.

Interestingly, at some point, probably in the 1st or 2nd century BCE, actors stopped wearing masks, and costumes became much more elaborate. There weren't any choruses anymore, but there was a lot more music. As much as two thirds of any given play may have been set to music.

Permanent theaters weren't built in Rome until 55 BCE, which seems late. In fact, it's about 100 years after the heyday of Roman dramatic literature. And even then, this first theater, built by Pompey, also included a temple, probably as an attempt to legitimize it. Before that, temporary wooden structures were used.

Roman theaters were architecturally different from Greek theaters in that the skene, now called the scaenae, had to become bigger and was now joined with the walls of the auditorium. The scaenae frons, the front of the building, could be quite elaborate and may have hosted rudimentary scenery.

For some context, though, let's end all this talk about theater by talking about not theater. What was Roman performance competing with?

Roman plays, like Greek plays, were performed at festivals. But these festivals were different. It wasn't so much about colonies pouring out tribute or honoring the children of fallen soldiers.

If we take one example, the ludi florales, which honored a prostitute goddess, it was more about watching naked female mimes and copulating goats. "Who needs theater?" is what a lot of the audience thought.

There are several speeches in comedies telling the audience that they have to sit down and keep still and pay attention. This may have been hard, because instead of seeing a play, you could go and watch a sea battle or a prisoner being fed to a lion or jugglers and acrobats.

When Terence debuted his play *Hecya* in 165 BCE, the audience left so that they could go and check out the rope dancers. Why do we have that piece of information and not, like, most plays of the time?

So, what's different about Roman theater isn't so much the content, which borrows unapologetically from post-classical Greek theater, and more the context. Performance is no longer an important civic right or a celebration of unique artistic prowess. For the most part, it's just another piece of entertainment, a little classier than copulating goats. Just like *Crash Course*.

Thanks for watching, and until next time, curtain.

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