Greek Comedy, Satyrs, and Aristophanes: Crash Course Theater #4

Crash Course: Theater
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Hey there, I am Mike. Welcome to Crash Course Theater. Today we will be covering Greek satyr plays and classical Greek comedy.

We'll also take a look at Aristophanes's *Lysistrata*, a play in which the women of Athens and Sparta decide to ban sexual intercourse until their husbands stop fighting a war. It might get a little lewd, but this play is actually a lot less lewd than most Greek comedies that came before it. So, the next time you're at a museum staring up at some noble piece of ancient marble statuary just remember, those folks loved a good fart joke.

[Opening music]

Satyr plays are the raunchy plays that appear at the conclusion of each tragic trilogy. They're meant to cheer an audience up after all that pity and fear and purgation. And what did audiences find most cheerful? You guessed it, phalli.

Like tragedies, satyr plays were usually derived from mythological stories. Unlike tragedies, satyr plays featured a chorus dressed as satyrs – ears, tails, shaggy legs, and tie-on phalluses.

They presented goofy versions of important legends. Here's your typical myth going along as planned, and then who shows up but horse dudes.

These plays normally focus on how fun-loving, drunk, and cowardly the satyrs are. But there are often a few human characters who engage in serious moral debate at some point.

Only one complete satyr play survives, and that's Euripides's *Cyclops*, based on an episode in *The Odyssey*. It's almost a retelling of *The Odyssey*'s version, except there are a lot of satyrs on the Cyclop's island, and they're the ones who get Odysseus into trouble with mean old Mr. Uni-Pupil.

While trying to avoid being eaten, Odysseus takes a moment to engage the Cyclops in an earnest debate on whether duty or pleasure-seeking is the key to a happy life. After that, the Cyclops and the head satyr, Silenus, get very drunk, and Silenus gets dragged off to maybe do cyclops sex stuff. But then Odysseus blinds the Cyclops and it ends happily for all...except the Cyclops, who is blinded and was probably like, "Ugh, that was my one good eye!"

You may remember from a couple episodes ago the drama contests of Dionysia. In 486 BCE, a separate contest for comedy was established, with five competitors each year. In classical Greece, comedy was pretty raucous and pretty ribald. The word "comedy" comes to us from the Greek word *komoidia*, which literally means "party song".

After forty years or so, comedy got popular enough that it had its own festival, the Lenaea, held in winter for Athenians only. No foreign dignitaries, which maybe makes sense, because these comedies were probably not how Athens wanted to represent itself to the world.

Like tragedies, comedies were inspired by the philosophies and problems of present-day Athens. But while tragedies tended to cloak their relevance in the mythic past or foreign lands, comedies were typically set in contemporary Athens, poking merciless fun at contemporaneous life.

They kept themselves safe by being so wild and crazy that you couldn't possibly take their political attacks seriously. Though, there are records of at least a couple lawsuits. Spoilsports.

Comedies differed from tragedies in that they often depended upon spectacular effects and featured funny costumes like padded stomachs and butts and yes, say it with me now (though I would totally understand if it makes you uncomfortable and you super don't want to) - phalluses.

Most of the formal elements – dialogic scenes interspersed with choral odes – were similar to tragedy, but comedy included something new. It was the *parabasis*, a speech in which the chorus addresses the audience directly.

And while tragedies focus on some noble figure falling, comedies are often about the little guy struggling to rise. Though, as we'll see with *The Lysistrata*, comedies can deal with great figures and serious subjects as well.

Unfortunately, few examples survive from the golden age of classical comedy, and all the ones that do are by Aristophanes. But we have fragments by many others, including Eupolis, a comedy writer so beloved that, according to legend, when he died fighting a war, the government passed a law exempting all poets from military service.

Let's take a moment to look at what separates comedies from satyr plays. Satyr plays are situated in a mythic past, and comedies are in the present. Satyr plays are typically rural, and comedies are usually urban. Satyr plays are about messing things up, comedies are about putting things back together. They tend to return social order and conclude with a compromise of some kind - a peace treaty, a constitution, a marriage. There's not necessarily any reconciliation at the end of a satyr play, while comedies are about offering absurd suggestions to real problems.

Aristophanes is the most famous figure of classical comedy, for the very good reason that his plays are the ones that still exist. Invading hordes, you are the worst! He wrote at least forty plays. We have eleven.

Aristophanes was born into a wealthy Athenian family sometime in the 450s. He started writing early, and he was almost immediately known for his splendid poetry, and for relentlessly mocking specific political figures. In fact, he was sued at least once for "unpatriotic behavior." Undeterred, Aristophanes kept the poetry and dirty jokes and mockery coming for quite some time.

Late in the 5th century BCE, though, Athens started losing the Peloponnesian War to Sparta, and a lot of things changed, including comedy. Suddenly, it wasn't such a great idea to satirize political figures. And Athens didn't have as much money to spend on spectacular effects and fancy choruses. So Arisophanes made a mid-career switch. He started writing plays for smaller choruses and with composite comic figures rather than specific, real-life politicians.

Aristophanes has a lot of famous plays: *The Birds*, *The Clouds*, *The Frogs*. But today, we're going to look at *The Lysistrata*, which we chose for a couple reasons.

For one, it's still relevant. In the early days of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, thousands of theater companies staged readings and productions of this play. *The Lysistrata's* frustration at the senselessness of wars and the tolls they exact won't seem very ancient to us.

Also, it's one of the rare ancient comedies in which the women get to be really funny, so that's nice. But also, remember that all the actors in ancient Greek theater were men. And all of the playwrights, too.

Anyways, let's go to the Thought Bubble.

The Lysistrata won first prize in 411 BCE, at which point the Peloponnesian War had waged for about twenty years. Athens and Sparta together defeated an enemy once thought unstoppable, the Persians. But after their victory, they squabbled over colonies.

Sparta had the superior land army; Athens had the superior navy. Athens was a democracy; Sparta was an oligarchy. Athens had a lot of money, and Sparta had a lot of staying power. Things got ugly and stayed ugly. Also, Athens had a plague that killed a lot of its citizens and its great leader, Pericles. That definitely did not help.

So this is the background story for *The Lysistrata*, at the start of which the women of Athens are fed up. They're tired of war. They're tired of being poor. And they're really, really tired of their husbands leaving to fight, because when their husbands are away, they can't have sex.

Led by a woman named Lysistrata, they devise a so-farfetched-it-just-might-work plan. They seize control of the Acropolis, which is where Athens keeps all of its money, and they say they're not going to give up the siege, and they will not have any sex, until the men stop fighting.

To show that they're really serious, they get a bunch of women from warring areas, like Sparta and Corinth, to join them. The women swear an oath and achieve a truce, showing the men that it can be done.

Thanks, Thought Bubble.

I would love to quote the chaste ladies' oath for you, but it's a family show and the oath is filthy, which is sort of the point.

To begin with, the women prepare a sacrificial victim. But instead of killing an animal, the sacrifice they make is to open a jug of wine, which they're obviously going to chug. And then, they swear to not let any man near them.

But the joke is that the oath they take is really specific. It's not just that they're swearing off sex. They're swearing in great detail about exactly the kind of sex they're not going to have. Like, exactly. Exactingly exact.

This is one of the things that Greek comedy does. It makes fun of beliefs and rituals that are often held sacred, but it doesn't satirize. The point isn't to show that oaths are ridiculous or that the goals of women are absurd. The point is to make fun of social conventions with the end goal of creating a better and happier society. So, cheers to that.

In a patriarchal society like ancient Greece, by the way, the idea of women seizing power was also pretty funny in itself, for the men, because it was just so impossible. The women might have had different ideas.

Most of the jokes are about how difficult it is to go without sex. Women keep pretending to be hurt or pregnant in order to sneak out of the Acropolis. Men come to try to entice their wives back into bed. And in one of the funniest scenes, a wife agrees, but then she keeps making more and more demands of her husband – she needs a mattress, she needs a pillow – and then she runs back into the Acropolis at the last minute, leaving her husband with an epic case of frustration.

At the end, Lysistrata comes out of the Acropolis and meets with Athenian and Spartan delegates. She reminds them of what they owe to each other and how ridiculous this conflict is.

Yet they agree to peace not because Lysistrata is so wise, but because the goddess of reconciliation is there, personified as a naked woman, and they all want to have sex with her. Which is creepy and misogynist and violent. And then there's a banquet, and the newly reconciled men and women sing and dance together.

From this, you can get a sense of how delightful and radical Greek comedy is while also maybe being kind of troubling. Suggesting the absurdity of a vicious and expensive war is a pretty racy thing for an Athenian play to do when Athens is still in the middle of that war.

But this isn't a bleak satire. It has a happy ending, with its enthusiastic embrace of food and wine and singing and dancing. And it tries to show that peace is possible and preferable, if maybe also kind of ruined by creepin' dudes.

Thanks for watching. Next time we'll look at the transition from Greek theater to Roman theater and the rise of popular entertainments that'll make *Lysistrata* seem tame. But until then, curtain.

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