Roman Theater with Plautus, Terence, and Seneca: Crash Course Theater #6

Crash Course: Theater
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Hey there. I'm Mike Rugnetta. This is *Crash Course Theater*, and today we'll be looking at the surviving literature of Roman drama.

Because Roman life wasn't all naval battles, naked miming prostitutes, and Christians being eaten by lions. Sometimes you had to take a break and go watch a play.

[*Crash Course Theater* intro]

Much like Roman deities, the most popular form of Roman drama were comedies that borrow heavily from Greek originals, especially the comedies of Menander, with a little bit of Atellan Farce thrown into the mix.

These comedies are called "fabulae palliatae". They have outdoor urban settings and are filled with stock characters.

The hero of the play is typically a type known as the "adulescens", a young man who is in love with the girl next door, the "virgo", whom he can't marry because she's of dubious parentage. Or he's in love with a prostitute, the "meretrix". Then there's the "senex", usually the father or the old man, who's either a strict miser or a louche skirt-chaser.

Other characters are the "servus", the wily slave; the "leno", the pimp; the "miles gloriosus", the bragging soldier; and the "parasite", a slave character who sponges off of his master. Sometimes wives and maidservants appear too.

These stock characters get themselves involved in stock plots, often a couple plots per play. Typical ones involve thwarted lovers, disagreement between parent and child, and mistaken identity, which is way easier to pull off when everyone is wearing masks. Sometimes there's a direct address to the audience too, kind of like a parabasis.

And almost always there's a happy ending, at least for the lovers. Comedies with happy endings are Yorick's faves. He is a man of infinite jest, after all. Oh, sorry, *was* a man of infinite jest.

In the Roman plays, most of the people and settings have Greek names, which is either a hat tip to the original source or a real failure of imagination on the part of these writers. But even though the setting is ostensibly Greek, the situations and jokes about current events, and even the street names, are definitely Roman, especially in the works of Plautus.

Plautus and Terence are the two guys we're going to be talking the most about. Why them? Well, partially because they were the greatest practitioners of Roman comedy. But also because, you guessed it, their plays survived.

Titus Maccius Plautus was born in 254 BCE in Umbria, a landlocked region with a lot of truffles. Legend has it that he worked as a stagehand in his hometown and then failed as a merchant before moving to Rome to write plays.

130 plays are attributed to him, but take that with a grain of Roman salt. A lot of writers tried to pass their plays off as his. A 1st century BCE scholar determined that twenty plays are definitely his and, get this, all twenty survive... more or less. That's fine, I'll take it.

Plautus plays are rambunctious comedies about middle-class people and their slaves. You could even call them "musicals", because from the meter they're written in we know that at least half of each play was sung.

He was a big influence on medieval and renaissance writers. Molière was a fan. And we will see that Shakespeare borrowed most of *The Comedy of Errors* from him.

People love Plautus because his plays are energetic and uproarious, with puns galore and tip-top alliterations that are tricky to translate.

Plautus's work are a lot like real life with more prostitutes and twins and songs, which is to say, I guess, that they're not like real life at all. But they are a hoot.

When he died in 184 BCE, he apparently wrote his own epitaph: "After Plautus died, comedy mourns, the stage is deserted; then laughter, mirth, and jest all wept in company." Okay, now tell us how you really feel about yourself. Yeesh.

The other major comic playwright was Publius Terentius Afer, aka Terence, possibly the first playwright of color. Terence was born around the late 180s or early 190s BCE in Africa at Carthage, in a spot that's now a Tunisian suburb. He was a slave owned by a Roman senator who educated him and then freed him.

He came to Rome to try to break into the theater by surprising a famous poet at his house. The poet was not thrilled. But then Terence began to read his play, and suddenly the poet was totally into it. Don't take too many lessons from this, though. I didn't get this job by showing up on Stan's doorstep with a stack of things to explain. It's not a great plan.

Terence wrote six plays which borrowed heavily from Menander. Cicero even called him a pint-sized Menander. After the sixth, he decided he needed to travel more to write better plays, so at the age of 25, he left Athens and died at sea.

His style is more sophisticated than Plautus's. The comedy is a little less rowdy, but the ironies are deeper, the characters are saner, the meter is more regular, and the constructions are sturdier. Fewer plot holes, fewer dirty jokes, some really elegant Latin. And the women aren't treated that badly, so that's nice. These are classier plays, but they're maybe not as funny.

And hey, one more difference. In Plautus and Menander, the prologue basically tells you what's going to happen. Terence doesn't do that. He creates suspense.

To take a closer look at Roman comedy, we're going to check out one of Plautus's plays, *The Menaechmi*, or *The Menaechmus Twins*, which we selected because Shakespeare borrowed most of it for *The Comedy of Errors*.

The Menaechmi begins with a prologue addressed directly to the audience. An actor comes out and tells everyone, "Hey, listen up. This is Plautus. You love Plautus. Give it up! Give it up for our man, Plautus."

The prologue tells us that once there was a merchant from Syracuse who had identical twin sons. He took one of those sons to Epidamnus, where the son was kidnapped and the merchant died of a broken heart.

Both boys eventually end up being called Menaechmus, which is a little weird, but hey, you do you. For simplicity, we're going to call them "M".

In the Thought Bubble.

Years after their poorly fated trip, Syracuse M comes to Epidamnus searching for his brother, Epidamnus M. Epidamnus M is infatuated with a prostitute, Erotium, a name that basically means "sexy". He keeps giving her all of his wife's stuff, which, understandably,

makes his wife mad.

Epidamnus M and his parasite servant go to visit Erotium. He gives her one of his wife's dresses and tells her to prepare a feast. And then he goes away.

Syracuse M comes in, gets mistaken for Epidamnus M, and gets to eat Erotium's feast. And he's all, "This place is rad!" But somehow it never occurs to him that maybe he's been mistaken for the identical twin brother he's been searching for for six years. Yeah, there are some plot holes. After the feast, Erotium gives Syracuse M the dress and tells him to take it to the tailor.

Meanwhile, Epidamnus M's wife is like, "Why do you keep giving all of my dresses to your prostitute?" So he tries to get it back from Erotium, and she's like, "Dude, I just gave it to you." Then his wife sees Syracuse M and mistakes him for her husband. He doesn't recognize her, so she tries to have him arrested for... craziness, and maybe dress stealing.

Just then, Epidamnus M enters, and the two identical brothers see each other, but it still doesn't occur to Syracuse M that this is the brother he's been looking for. Luckily, the smart servant figures it out. The brothers are reunited, and Epidamnus M decides to auction off all of his stuff, including his wife, so he can return with his brother to Syracuse.

Thanks, Thought Bubble.

So yeah, it's absurd, sexist, heavily reliant on stock characters and stock situations, but still funny.

Not all of Roman drama is quite so hilarious, though. Take the work of Seneca the Younger, please! Ha ha, just a little comedy comedy for you, there.

Seneca Jr. is born Lucius Annaeus Seneca in what is modern-day Cordoba, Spain, in 4 BCE. That's just a little while after Horace publishes the *Ars Poetica*, the first major work since Aristotle's *Poetics* to tell people what plays should be.

Seneca's dad was a big-deal rhetorician, and when he was young he was moved to Rome to study stoic philosophy. Because there's nothing the kids like more than stoicism.

He came to adulthood during a pretty volatile time in Roman history. Little Seneca, who grew up to be another big-deal rhetoric guy, kept running afoul of emperors, which was easy to do because a lot of them were dangerous psychopaths.

Caligula almost executed Seneca. Then Claudius banished Seneca on the grounds of adultery. Claudius's wife called him back and installed him as a tutor for Nero, who became emperor and kept Seneca on as a councillor.

But then Nero went a little crazy, and even though Seneca was retired, Nero blamed him for taking part in a conspiracy and ordered him to kill himself, so Seneca did. Man, stoics, ugh.

When Seneca wasn't being threatened by emperors, he sometimes wrote plays, which are mostly revisions of classic Greek works, and they're all tragedies. One possible exception is his *Apocalocyntosis*, a satire about the emperor Claudius that no one really likes and which maybe he didn't even write.

In general, Roman tragedies based on Greek subjects are known as "fabulae crepidatae", and there were lots – 300 years worth. But, basically, Seneca's are the only ones that survive.

Seneca's tragedies are notable because they're the first to favor the five-act structure that Shakespeare would adopt. They have a different relationship to the divine, with a lot less confidence that the gods are going to help everything work out, which is to say they're pretty dark. Which makes sense, when you remember all of the scary, violent emperors who were ruling Rome during Seneca's time.

Nero was as merciless and arbitrary as even the most capricious god. And remember all that stuff the Greeks liked to keep off stage, like, say, really extreme and incredibly gory violence? That's just the kind of thing Seneca wants to show. Because atrocities, especially those perpetrated on the weak by the powerful, were facts of life in his society and also a regular feature in violent entertainments like gladiator fights.

So if you've ever thought, "Hey, I'd really like to see Oedipus blind himself, and maybe he could actually tear out both of his eyeballs", man, I have got a play for you. But not you, you don't have eyes.

Because of scenes like that one, and the fact that Seneca was a high-class kind of person, there's been a lot of debate about whether his plays were actually performed or whether they were closet dramas, meant to be read rather than produced. Certainly, some of the scenes, like the cannibal meal in *Thyestes*, would have required special effects.

But let's not put some creepy props or even extreme violence beyond the limits of the Roman stage. Remember, these are the people who thought that a group of dwarves beating a woman with spiked clubs was just normal entertainment.

Check us out next time for a survey of ancient Sanskrit theater. And then theater's going to disappear for a while, at least in the West. Until then, curtain.

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