



THE BIRTH OF COMEDY

Discussion 2 – Performing Aristophanes

I'm **James Robson** with me in the studio I have **Nick Lowe**, **Edith Hall** and theatre director **Helen Eastman**. Today we're discussing the challenges of staging Aristophanes for a contemporary audience. How do directors work with comedy written 2,500 years ago? And how do audiences and actors react to it? I find it amazing that anyone is brave enough to take on Aristophanes in the modern world. There's so much to convey; humour, topicality, song, dance, fantasy, sexuality, and just sheer energy. Greek tragedy seems a bit easier to take on, perhaps because the actors and audience are more familiar with the style. Helen, you have experience of staging Greek comedy for modern audiences - could you talk a bit about that and what changes you've had to make to make them work?

Helen: There're some really interesting challenges in how you take satirical comedy - so a political comedy - and how you make it work for a contemporary audience. Not just the obvious things of whether you update references or not, but there's an intrinsic problem with how you form a community for an audience for a play now because Aristophanes can count on everybody in his audience having certain reference points within his community or certain names they'll recognise. So it's much harder if you think about theatre-going public now who might turn up to a regional theatre on a Friday night to see a performance to know where their reference points are culturally. The biggest challenge is how you keep it political and how you update the referencing but how you also form some kind of community within the audience - so that they can laugh at something altogether. I always think a really good example is the pantomime in British theatre which is something we do and we do all together as families and we go at a special time of year and as an audience we all join in together and we all sing and we all understand certain conventions of it theatrically so we can be made to laugh very quickly because we know the comic shorthand of it. So we do have popular comic forms in British theatre that have come through the British theatre tradition and I think in terms of how we handle Aristophanes, contemporary British theatre gets better and better at doing it as it can draw on its own popular theatre techniques to find that comedy. But there is a challenge, there's music, there's dance, there's anarchy, it's riotous, there are fantastical characters suddenly mixed with heavy politics and it's very, very naughty and that's something we're less used to seeing in the theatre as well - sexualised comedy is not a common bit of programming in your average theatre. So there's a scandalous nature to a lot of Aristophanes' plays and you have to work quite hard for it to be about anything else sometimes with a modern audience because so scandalised are they by that content that almost everything else gets lost. So there are interesting questions about where you place the naughtiness and

how you pitch it to a modern audience to get a similar effect to what you think the effect might have been on the original audience.

James: Sure. Edith?

Edith: There are two basic ways of staging Aristophanes - apart from trying to be authentic and do it like the ancient Greeks in masks and outdoors which doesn't work well at all, but it's fun! One is very much to emphasise the music. And some of the most successful of all adaptations have really, really emphasised that this is musical theatre, it's light-hearted musical theatre. So Stephen Sondheim's *Frogs* is by far the most famous because it was a hit on Broadway, that works extremely well. It's quite interesting that Joan Littlewood ...you probably don't know that *Oh What A Lovely War*, was really her answer to *Lysistrata*. She had produced *Lysistrata* the year before so when she wants to do an anti-war play she uses British popular music hall songs, that's how she did it. So she's trying to find the spirit of Aristophanes rather than the letter as it were. The other main way is to emphasise much more the witty much more verbal puns and they are extraordinarily difficult to try and update, it's an incredible challenge. It's much better to throw away the contemporary references to classical Athens and substitute things. Actually, you know what? The hardest I've ever laughed was in an improvised political piece of agit-prop based on *The Clouds*, directed by Helen, in a campaign about closing University College of Royal Holloway. When Helen put on *The Clouds* with David Bullen the author - it was so funny we nearly died because every single joke was about denying students access to education without paying, just like poor old Pheidippides can't go to the Thinkery without paying. Because it spoke to the audience's concerns, it was hysterical.

Nick: And it won!

Helen: Yeah it worked. The more fantastical plays, with fantastic choruses or anthropomorphic choruses are very exciting to tackle because you've got lots of spectacle and they offer quite a different invitation to theatricality than some of the plays which have a more human chorus or a more human element. But that kind of fantasy story is quite alien to us in terms of its meanderingness structurally and it is so far from a satisfyingly structured five act-er which is what we've been brought up on. But I think there's a renaissance in how to embrace that sense of anarchy and fun that's happening in productions of Aristophanes now which for me feels very authentic and I feel an utterly irreverent attitude to the original text is exactly what Aristophanes would have wanted.

James: Well I think that's right, some of the best performances I've seen have been when the play has been thrown out of the window and recreated from elements of it. It's completely the opposite to traditional translation which is somehow trying to reflect word for word or sentence

for sentence what the original text said. But for example, there was a wonderful production of *Clouds* I saw a few years ago that was done as a musical - it was just a completely through sung musical with lots of big numbers, and hell it worked, and some of the longeurs of the play were got rid of and others were introduced. Lots of nice contemporary references but not too many so we all shared it and a small theatre setting as well with actors acting their hearts out so it really got you on board the production and yeah we laughed, we cried and everything happened in the right way.

Nick: But it is worth saying that the performance of Aristophanes for a modern audience is essentially limited to four plays out of the 11 that we've got. There are only four plays that are ever really staged or lend themselves readily to staging. *Clouds* is one of them, obviously, because people have heard of Socrates and it happens to be a play with a lot of familiarisable things in it. It's got Aristophanes' only Homer Simpson type anti-hero who is someone you root for even as he shoots himself in the foot and finally in the head. It's got this theme of the moment when the genie of rhetoric is let out of the bottle and you suddenly realise it's possible to train yourself to lie and fool people. And these are things which resonate very strongly. *Lysistrata* has always been a major production favourite because again its interweaving of issues of gender and war are very easy to translate to almost any kind of historical moment. *Birds* has always been a popular play because it's so spectacular and one of the fascinating things about that is we still have no idea what Aristophanes was trying to do, but because there is so much you can do with it theatrically it has become this wonderfully repurposable text. And on a slightly lower rung than the rest, *Frogs*, because it's got this very sustained literary debate which can be recast in more contemporary terms. But there are seven other plays which are just as wonderful and are almost never put on which would pose kinds of challenges which none of those four plays quite confront you with.

James: Partly to prove your point, I think Helen's got experience directing at least two of those plays, perhaps more I don't know. You have a new production of *Frogs* coming up and I'd like to learn more about that.

Helen: Yes I'm working on it with a composer called Alex Silverman who is a closet classicist who I've worked with on many production and like me shares a geeky obsession with the utter brilliance of Greek metre and we have a lot of slightly obscure conversations about that. But the most important thing about Alex is that he's very funny and his music is very funny. He's written a number of comic productions, musicals, music for a lot of comedies and he's relentlessly funny and what he's therefore doing in a very sophisticated but also accessible and fun way is managing to blend lots of nods to the original Greek with its metres and rhythms but also lots of musical gags in the same way we can play visual satire gags or update it with references, he's packing it with musical references that are inherently very funny. We're drawing on lots of British populist theatre traditions - from the all singing all

dancing chorus to the song sheet to the wet scene with a hint of *One Man, Two Guv'nors* about it. So there's a really rich theatrical casserole going on there of lots and lots of ideas and lots of fun and that very fast-paced, very anarchic, slightly carnival atmosphere feels quite authentic to the original even though it's a very sophisticated literary debate within a very silly, very fun package of theatre.

This is the debate between Aeschylus and Euripides in *The Frogs* about who should be taken back to Earth as the best tragic poet, from the underworld.

Helen: Yes and the idea that you can in any way quantify that. Essentially the play opens with them saying there's no decent poets left, we'll have to go down and get one from the underworld. And therefore that becomes a much bigger question about generations, about what we value, of high culture / low culture, progress. It's about much more than a debate about two writers, it's a debate about two ways of writing and thinking but it has elements of the game show once they start to compete. They have to weigh out their words in a giant set of scales which is the sort of preposterous thing which would come up nowadays on a reality television show, but has a really serious and intelligent undercurrent to it.

James: Just to move on there are two key players I want to talk about briefly. One is the actors and the other is the audience. My experience working with actors at the Open University when we've recorded a couple of plays there - *Lysistrata* and also *Clouds* - was that at first the actors were slightly over reverent of the script and it took quite a while to warm them up and to get them to have real fun with what they were doing. *Clouds* was fantastic and it really did have elements of the game show, because you're doing audio you can create lots of audio landscapes and our two main characters there were Welsh. And we had some strange reactions on the forum from students about that who thought somehow it wasn't right to have Welsh accents, that we had a Jamaican chorus as well and that somehow this idea that classical drama ought to be performed in RP accents from the South-East of England and I wondered if you had experience of actors and audiences reacting - this whole idea of authenticity, how somehow messing with the plays isn't giving you the real thing?

Helen: There're two completely different things there, both of which are really unhelpful aren't they? One of which is authenticity which is a completely ridiculous concept in that we cannot recreate authentic representations of plays because we can't recreate authenticity of audience and without authenticity of audience it's irrelevant what's going on on stage because the relationship isn't authentic. The class accent snobbery or the regional accent snobbery is a really interesting topic in the way we've staged Greek productions both comedy and tragedy over the last couple of hundred years in British theatre and obviously it was hijacked both by educational establishments and the cultural elite and performed in plummy RP accents for quite a long time. But there are a lot of theatre companies and playwrights

throughout the 70s and 80s that did a lot to try and recover that and to reclaim Aristophanes as populist theatre and popular audiences. Tony Harrison, Ted Hughes, Blake Morrison have all worked quite fiercely to get away from the idea that Greek tragedies are best performed in a frankly Southern RP accent which has absolutely no intellectual legitimacy as having any relationship to the original plays. Also there's a massive problem if a performance of Aristophanes feels intellectualised or feels classist I suppose, because actually it should have a really fantastic localised energy and should certainly reflect the community its being performed to because that's the whole point of how political satire works - there's a relationship going on between audience and stage.

Edith: I'm going to say something a bit more formalist about the actors. I've only actually been in a couple of productions myself, but I did once play *Lysistrata* and was Lysistrata which was actually an enormous role, it's about 800 lines and you have to learn an awful lot of Greek. The central protagonist, the central character, in Aristophanes is unbelievably important to the success of the play. And I don't like this in a sense, I like ensemble theatre. But if you haven't got a strong lead character for whoever it is - Strepsiades, Lysistrata, Pisthetairus, Praxagora, Dionysus then you are absolutely lost and one of the reasons for that is the structure for them. Helen earlier mentioned the idea of a classical five act-er which has a nice structure and leads to a climax, that is not how comedy works, that is not how ancient comedy worked one bit - you front load it. Aristophanes put all his money in the big stunts at the beginning, the big costumes. So you have the Frogs coming on, or Birds coming on, or in Peace you have this extraordinary entrance where the protagonist, Trygaeus, goes up on a crane to heaven pretending he's Pegasus - you have a huge spectacle. Once a comic lead has got his audience in his hand, he can do anything and they'll laugh, it's like stand up. So the stunt has to turn into continuous stand up and that relationship has to be established at the start and I think that some of the problems with overly respecting the text is that not seeing that in a sense you've just got to have a brilliant stand-up comedian as your leading actor and then the others can even be mediocre - because it'll work.

James: OK thanks very much, I think we're going to have to end it there. So thanks to my guests Edith Hall, Nick Low and Helen Eastman.