



THE BIRTH OF COMEDY

Programme 3 - Sex, swearing and satire in Aristophanes' comedy

This audio contains strong language and graphic sexual imagery which some might find offensive.

IN: Aristophanes is definitely more sexual than other plays. It doesn't beat around the bush, it's right out there..

It's just funny to see a tall guy dressed as a girl, pretty naked or in suspenders or what not. I just need to act like a prostitute so any man who comes I'm all over, there's a few sexy moves in there.

Mine's very wide in girth and wide in length, it's got wires in it so you can move it all around with the penis hanging out. It's very obscene...

The physical, the body humour of it is universal and timeless, that's something everybody can appreciate.

1. The god of drama, whose statue had pride of place in the Theatre at Athens, was Dionysus – also the god of wine, transitions and transgressions.

Comedy in Greece has its roots not just in popular forms of entertainment, but also seems to have grown out of the abuse and obscene language which was a feature of religious rituals connected with gods like Dionysus.

Unsurprisingly, then, given its earthy and obscene origins, some of Greek comedy can be shocking to our modern sensibilities. I'm James Robson, this is The Birth of Comedy, and I'm exploring how Aristophanic plays got away with being quite so ...rude...

IN: The only things he knows about is supping and fucking...

I think I'm in heaven when I curse my master in secret.

Get in!

And eavesdropping on your masters when they're being indiscreet.

When I do that, I come in my pants.

IN: Most cultures find sex funny in certain aspects - an element of the ridiculous, an element of the absurd.

2. Emeritus Professor of Classical Languages and Literature, at the University of Oxford Oliver Taplin.

IN: People get themselves into humiliating or physically ridiculous situations in the context of their sex lives and Aristophanic comedy is very ready to exploit that and to exploit it with an explicitness which generally speaking most theatrical traditions in the world have not shared.

3. Obscenity in the plays included what we might call toilet humour, and sexual language, dances and gestures. Actors, too, would wear padded leather phalluses and occasionally naked women feature in the plays – most likely played in the original productions by appropriately costumed men. But outside the theatre, that doesn't mean that ancient Greeks themselves were any more obscene than other cultures.

IN: Comedy was a special licensed occasion. The kind of grotesque comic dance that involved a lot of fairly grotesque and physical and sexual posturing was okay in a comedy, but if you did it in the street you would be regarded as disgusting. In the comedy, the person performing this physical and sexual grotesqueness is wearing a mask so there's a kind of licence to it. So it's not saying that ancient Greeks behaved like that in the street in everyday life. On the contrary, it is if you like that it was channelled into this specially permitted occasion.

4. Comedies have long played on sex for a laugh, of course, everywhere from Shakespeare to Men Behaving Badly... but most modern theatrical traditions play more on innuendo and suggestion. And although Aristophanes can be subtle at times, his explicitness still shocks more than most, even today – as in this scene from his play Peace, where a man describes what his fellow citizens can look forward to doing with a prostitute.

IN: And then tomorrow, once you've got her you'll be able to hold a fine athletic contest and wrestle her to the ground, set her up on all fours, oil yourselves and fight no holds barred, striking and gouging with fist as well as cock. And in two days time you can hold a horse race with rider outriding rider and other charioteers will be lying on the ground and their dicks all stiff after falling down whilst negotiating these curves.

WASPS ATMOS (under)

5. For Gina Sheeran, who recently directed a production of Aristophanes' play The Wasps at the University of Kent, this sexual content raised some interesting challenges.

IN: Definitely some of the language had to be changed especially because there is some explicit language. I kept in some of it because I wanted to keep in the traditional element. of it...But I knew that I had to cut out quite a lot of it because there were going to be people there who could get offended by some of the things that were said in the play - I hate saying this

word, the word that begins with 'C' that I can't say. For a lot of people coming to see it, it is quite an offensive word. But then it was also the fact that it is such an important word for Aristophanes, it comes up so much. so my compromise is that I've included it in the point where I think is the most important and has the impact. I've only kept it in once, whereas if we say it maybe four or five times I think some people would be a bit like - oh I didn't like that.

6. Beyond language though, some of the plots themselves touch on taboos which are a challenge to reproduce today. In *The Wasps*, there's a scene in which a character describes how his own daughter regularly fishes 3 obols - Greek coins - out of his mouth with her tongue...

CLIP (under)

IN: I've never seen a cast be so affected by a line. It makes your skin crawl and you almost feel like you're going to be sick from hearing this. It's one of those things that when you read it you're horrified and rehearsing it, you feel the atmosphere go absolutely tense. I felt like I should cut it but i couldn't because it just adds to this man's character. There is almost like that catharsis element where you've had this really tense horrific moment and then there's a break and you can go back to the rest of the play. The audience still remember he's said this horrific thing but it takes any tension out of their body so they can get back to this comedy.

7. Of course, sexual morality has changed considerably in the last 2,500 years and it's difficult to capture the precise effect that this and other lines would have had on the original audience. But Aristophanes' plays still provide food for thought for audiences today, tapping as they do into sexual taboos and preoccupations, and challenging our attitudes to offensiveness and acceptability.

Old Comedy has been described as a 'literary dead end', the suggestion being that it had no real influence on later comic traditions. It's true that its ebullient, iconoclastic energy, fantastic plots and earthy expression eventually gave way to the New Comedy of later Greek playwrights like Menander: whose comedy of manners, errors, and everyday life has more in common with today's classic sitcom. But, echoes of Aristophanic Comedy can be seen in the grotesque satirical narratives of writers like Swift and Voltaire. And even in some more recent television comedy. Oliver Taplin.

IN: One of the most Aristophanic pieces of comic theatre that I've experienced was back in the days of *Spitting Image* where nothing was too sacred, where nothing was too powerful, nothing was above or below *Spitting Image*'s attention. If there was any issue, it would draw attention to it through making it grotesque, through making it funny. So I think *Spitting Image* is a very good illustration, was a very good illustration because we miss it these days, of how

something can be inextricably comic and serious at the same time and that I think is Aristophanic

8. To recreate Old Comedy today I think you would need elements of opera, musicals, and panto, a dash of Have I Got News for You? and Monty Python, with the bawdy adolescent humour of the Inbetweeners, all set in a football stadium with a crowd of thousands for an audience.

In its day, ancient Greek comedy provided an opportunity to say the unsayable and do the un-
oable – a temporary release from the social constraints of everyday life. And it had the ultimate get-out clause of all good comedy: that if anyone protests things have got out of hand, you can always say 'I was only joking'.