



THE BIRTH OF COMEDY

Programme 2 - Making Athens laugh: the ancient sense of humour

IN: The excitement of Aristophanes is its anarchy, its fantastical imagination and yet being able to be so politically pertinent. It's an amazing blend of theatricality and satire.

IN: Ancient Greek comedy partly made people laugh through ridicule. The humiliation or the cutting down to size of the powerful. Nothing is too grand or too serious for Greek comedy to keep off ridiculing it.

IN: He was standing there, gazing up, open-mouthed, a gecko shat on him from the eaves in the dock.

I like that - a gecko shitting on Socrates! Oh come on, let me in, open up the thinkery and show me, Socrates, as fast as you can, I'm just dying to learn!

1. The first official performance of a Greek comic play took place in 487 BC, as part of an annual religious festival in Athens. 2,500 years on, I'm looking at what early comedy was like and what made it ... well, comic.

I'm James Robson and this is The Birth of Comedy.

MUSIC

2. We know the names of scores of playwrights who took part in the dramatic competitions in ancient Athens, but the only early Greek comic plays to survive in anything other than fragmentary form are those written by Aristophanes. In fact, early Greek Comedy is sometimes known simply as Aristophanic comedy, or Old Comedy, to distinguish it from later styles.

Theatre Director Helen Eastman.

IN: Aristophanes was born in Athens in the 5th century BC and he wrote about 40 comedies in his life and we have 11 of them surviving. We know that some of his plays won first prize at the city dionysia, it was a competition. We know some of them won second prize and some won third prize, he was given awards for his political messages to unify Athens at one point in his career and we know that other parts of his works were extremely unpopular with the State for the criticism he made of the leadership. He lived through a challenging time in Athens -

when he starts writing we're at the height of a strong democracy and a lot of civic involvement in the state. By the end of his career, the war with Sparta has been lost, the democracy is falling apart, it's extremely challenging political times.

3. Aristophanes employed traditional aspects of ancient Greek theatre including large, all-singing all-dancing choruses, often dressed as animals, and which regularly gave the plays their names. So, there's *The Frogs*, *The Birds*... *The Wasps*... The plots are often escapist fantasies, revolving around a downtrodden, ageing man – or sometimes a woman – coming up with a fantastic scheme to change things for the better.

In *Lysistrata*, the women of Greece stage a sex strike to force their husbands to end the war – a war that, in real life, had been raging between the Greek states for nearly twenty years. And in a play called *Peace*, a farmer, Trygaeus, flies to Heaven on a giant dung beetle.

But behind the fantasy element, contemporary Athens is always visible, and Aristophanes also has Trygaeus bring back a prostitute for the amusement of the city council - and presumably the audience.

IN: Members of the Council, my Lords: behold Festival! Look what a bundle of goodies I've brought for you! I present her to you so you can raise her legs in the air straight away and then have a full on feast. Look here, there's even an oven for you to use! Oh wow, it's a cute one too. There will be a reason it's all black and smoky, the council used to keep all thier kitchen utensils up there during the war

4. The plays feature stock comic characters like the clever slave, the grumpy old man, the outspoken old hag, and the sex-mad young wife – as well as a generous helping of puns and clever word-play. Comedy was also a rare opportunity for playwrights to comment on society and the influential figures of the day.

IN: Aristophanes has this incredible license in the plays, not always without censure, but to say incredibly strong political thoughts about the democracy, about Athens and about very specific individuals. There are a lot of jokes at the expense of recognisable figures around the city and often what we know about those figures comes from Aristophanes' plays.

5. An Athenian politician, Cleon, had a running battle with Aristophanes, which was played out in front of audiences, blow by blow, over a number of years. But perhaps the best-known target of his abuse is Socrates.

In this scene from his play *Clouds* an ardent pupil describes the philosopher's ideas to a visitor at a make-believe school for philosophers: the so-called 'Thinkery'...

IN: What would you say if I told you another one of Socrates' ideas...?

What idea? Oh go on, please tell me!

Caerophone asked Socrates whether he thought a gnat's hum comes from its mouth or its rump. He said 'A gnat's intestine is narrow and the air is forced through a slender tube right to the rump. Then the arse hole since it is a cavity lying in close proximity to a narrow tube resonates owing to the force of the air that passes through it.

Right so,...a gnats arse hole is a trumpet!

6. The portrait of Socrates presented in *Clouds* is far from flattering and there's good evidence to suspect that it influenced public opinion in Athens against him.

But although Socrates is still a household name today, this is the exception rather than the rule when it comes to much of the social satire in Aristophanic comedy. References to long-dead politicians can sometimes feel remote and baffling for modern audiences. So how do contemporary productions deal with the challenge of performing something written over two thousand years ago?

IN: It dates really, really quickly so it's a real challenge to make it funny and to make it immediate but it's a massively brilliant challenge to really think about how you take an ancient comedy and make it for our time and actually the essential themes within it; the questions about power or money or corruption or status, love or sex, are absolutely timeless, its just the manifestation is so specific to the time in which they were written.

7. Helen Eastman directed a version of *The Birds* in which the plot was modernised to take in environmental issues, and the characters were updated by changing them into recognisable contemporary figures.

IN: We had a lovely moment where Richard Branson turned up, a very hilarious moment with Posh and Becks, the gods arriving at the end were in fact played by Gordon Brown. The finest Gordon Brown impersonation I've ever seen, who was whimpering covered in bird shit and eventually stripped naked and roasted until he agreed to the children in the audience's eco demands which was a suitable Aristophanic moment we thought. If we revived that show now, what would that character be? It probably wouldn't be Gordon Brown, it'd be a two-headed Cameron Clegg monster.

ATMOS

8. To get a feel for how Aristophanes continues to be updated today, I dropped into a rehearsal of one of his most famous plays, *The Wasps* a social satire about the Athenian jury system.

IN: This is Xanthias, this is Corus, Corus, we have slave...

Gina Sheeran is director of the play at the University of Kent.

Quick one of you run around the house, my old man's managed to get himself stuck in the oven....

CLIP FROM PLAY (fade under)

IN: How have you managed that divide between, one the one hand it's an ancient Greek play, but on the other hand you're trying to appeal to a modern audience?

It definitely is a compromise in some elements of the play because I'm definitely a traditionalist when it comes to plays. I'm one of these people who believe that someone has written a text and you should stay as true to it as possible because it was written for a reason. However obviously it is that I need to make it more modern. One of the jokes is about the hermaphrodites so we've updated that to saying it's about Lady Gaga because it's obviously a cultural reference from a few years ago.

9. Another aspect of the drama which may be hard to palette today is the portrayal of women. There are numerous scenes featuring voiceless, female characters, essentially there for the sexual amusement of men.

I was intrigued to find out how Gina dealt with the 'flute-girl' scene in *Wasps*, in which a slave-girl dances naked on stage in front of one of the male characters.

IN: There was no way I was allowing a girl to come on stage naked and I thought that even if we had a girl in clothing, I still thought to our modern audience it would be too much. So I decided to definitely go with a boy, I just thought it would be a lot funnier, so we're dressing him up as a girl at the moment, he's having fake breasts built for him and he's got little girl flesh-coloured knickers so it looks like he's naked and what then happens is she grabs him and because we wanted to add this sexual, almost prostitute element, it looks as if she's giving him a blow job.

10. There's no doubt that sexuality and obscenity are key elements of ancient Greek comedy, and part of what made its audiences laugh. And some of it still feels quite risqué, even to the most open-minded audiences.

In the next programme I'll be asking whether ancient Greeks were really sex mad. Or whether behind the smut and toilet humour there's something else at play.