



## THE BIRTH OF COMEDY

*Programme 1 - Creating a spectacle: the theatre and Athens*

### James Robson:

1. It's 487 BC and the city of Athens is buzzing. Crowds of citizens are making their way to the Theatre of Dionysus on the slopes of the acropolis, to watch the annual drama festival. But this time they're about to see something very different from the usual tragedies on show.

I'm James Robson, Senior Lecturer in Classical Studies at the Open University. And this is The Birth of Comedy.

### MUSIC (under)

The same era as produced the great historian Thucydides, the Parthenon, Plato, also produced the same things we would recognise as theatrical comedy. There was this extraordinary flowering of many, many different art forms and intellectual forms and there is comedy right in the centre of this productive and influential era of human civilisation

IN: When you say Ancient Greek Comedy to somebody, they very often conjure up an image of something that's quite dull or quite academic and are really surprised by how unbelievably vibrant and theatrical it is and how naughty it is - and it's unbelievably naughty

Is this the Festival we used to screw on our way round from temple and .. after a few drinks?  
There one and the same...

Oh master what an arse she's got on her

2. A typically crude snippet from the comedy of Aristophanes, one of the greatest comic playwrights of this early period.

Of course comedy wasn't suddenly 'born' 2,500 years ago in fifth-century Athens. Humans have always laughed at themselves, each other and the world around them. But it was in Ancient Greece that the word 'comedy' was first coined – from the Greek words for revel – *kōmos* – and song – *ōdē*. And it was in Athens that comic theatre, *kōmōidia*, first began to be taken seriously as an art form.

### MUSIC

3. The first comic plays in ancient Athens were performed as part of religious festivals, And the most high-profile of these was the Great Dionysia, where both tragedies and comedies competed in theatrical competitions.

Athens was the first one who said right we're going to set a whole day aside, we're going to put a lot of money into it and we're going to make a big competition of it - that's what the records say first happened in 487...

#### **4. Emeritus Professor of Classical Languages and Literature, at the University of Oxford Oliver Taplin.**

IN: The Greeks seemed to be rather obsessed with competitions, almost all communal occasions managed to turn into competitions. The most famous one of all, the athletic competitions, almost every religious festival and there were a lot of festivals during the course of the year, nearly all of them would have athletic events. The Drama competition may be the very first competition the Greeks invented where there were no athletics and the drama competition lasted altogether five days and one whole day of that competition was devoted to comedy.

5. The standard format of the Great Dionysia was for five comic playwrights to be chosen each year, to write new plays – which they often directed, too. The productions were judged by ten ordinary citizens, picked more or less at random from each of the ten tribes in Athens. The prize for the lucky playwright? An ivy wreath. But also of course, the glory of winning this prestigious event.

The theatrical experience for the audience was quite different from what we might expect today. For a start the plays were performed outside, to huge crowds numbering 10,000 or more. And in the fifth century BC, Greek theatres were not the stone structures we see surviving today: more typically the audience would have looked onto the acting and dancing space, the orchestra, from a hillside, or perhaps from specially built wooden seating.

#### **CROWD NOISE / MUSIC**

6. Not all sections of Athenian society were equally represented in the theatre audience. Democratic though Athens was at this time, it was nevertheless a slave economy and it's unlikely that these slaves were admitted to the theatre in any great numbers. And while the question of whether women were in the audience is still hotly debated, it's nonetheless clear that females were not the target audience. All the same, the men present would have been

drawn from all ages and a range of backgrounds. Director Helen Eastman is associate artist at Oxford University's Archive of Performances of Greek Drama.

IN: Certainly everyone who had the vote would be at the theatre, there was a public fund to subsidise anyone who couldn't afford their ticket, it was seen as your civic duty to attend. The scope of the platform you have to influence the thoughts of your citizens is absolutely enormous.

## 7. Oliver Taplin

IN: I think it's a very important feature of ancient Greek theatre that no citizen was excluded. The audience is a great deal more homogeneous than the way we think of it. We think, you know, on the one hand you watch Ibsen or on the other hand you watch X Factor. But that I think is a kind of dichotomy which is much less applicable to ancient Athens where there is much more of a unified notion of the place of the arts and of wisdom in society

8. So what would you expect to see at a comic performance in fifth-century Athens?

The actors playing the main parts would all have been male, and how they looked was fundamental to what made ancient Greek comedy funny. Sometimes they would be dressed as women, foreigners, gods, or animals. But regardless of the character the actor was playing, things were very much larger than life ...

IN: They were grotesquified. They wore a lot of body padding - huge great belly, huge great bum and all the male characters would have a large, salami-like phallus made of leather which would dangle and which was considered to be both funny and ugly, and they would have ugly masks. The comic mask was ugly for both men and women, so even if you've got, say Aphrodite or some beauty on the stage, the actor would be wearing an ugly female mask. And the male mask tended to have a straggly beard, it tended to have high eyebrows, a snub nose and to be balding - all features which were regarded as rather grotesque and unfortunate.

9. Today, we often encounter ancient comedy for the first time as words on a page. But for ancient Athenians comedy was a rich, multimedia event – a feast for both the eyes and the ears.

## MUSIC

IN: It involves dance, it involves music, it involves singing, it involves spectacular physicality, so it's very physical theatre, a shown use of stage objects, a lot of falling over, a lot of going up and down steps, people bumping into each other and things of that sort.

#### 10. Helen Eastman

IN: Certain aspects of the comedy are absolutely timeless; the slapstick humour, the naughtiness. There's certain comic formulas that have just stood the test of time and are very familiar to us; there's parts that feel like pantomime, the central parts of the plays feel very much like stand-up when characters stand up to talk to an audience, there's parts that feel like good circus.

11. Though ancient Greek comedy was a popular form of entertainment, it wasn't all slapstick, ugly masks and falling over. The plays were highly crafted, and engaged very much with current events.

IN: It is a comedy that engages with issues of politics, with issues of thought - what we would now call philosophy, with issues of art and music and contemporary culture.

IN: I personally love that kind of high culture / low culture blend of something that's so political astute and intelligent but on the other hand has this really naughty, base, scatological humour - lots of slapstick, lots of filthy jokes, and for more that's celebratory of every aspect of our lives, that you can veer and career between being so silly and being so pertinent within the space of 20/30 seconds of theatre.

12. Playwrights, such as Aristophanes, the only writer from this period whose plays survive in full, often looked to the more established genre of Greek Tragedy for inspiration, reusing tragedy's plot lines, characters and language. Aristophanes in particular parodied tragedy for a laugh, but also claimed to rival its 'serious' message.

IN: Tragedy makes an important contribution to the way we feel, to the way we think, to the way we respond to suffering and therefore in a sense tragedy teaches. But comedy too, Aristophanes would say, comedy too teaches, comedy also has ways in which it makes people more aware of the world, more aware of the complications of the world, more aware of the absurdities of the world. Comedy approaches life in a way through escape, in a way through the fantasy in which the powerful people are brought low, even the gods are made to look ridiculous, the gods are made human. Comedy says we can learn something about the human condition through showing it through its ridiculous aspects and that is as valid, I think Aristophanes would want to say, as valid a way of coming at it as tragedy is.

13. In the next programme we'll look in more detail at the work of Aristophanes, and find out how his plays are being reinterpreted today.