

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

## ROMAN THEATRE

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**Overview** Theater in ancient Rome first makes its appearance in the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., and gains its original character during the first two centuries of the Roman Republic: a character as a public platform for political power speeches. During those centuries the platform was extended, by the presentation of speeches and actions during periods of religious festivals and public holidays. For example each September, in honor of Jupiter, the city Ludi were performed for the citizens' pleasure, and became an occasion for actors to make their ways forward as community voices. In the mid-third century the infiltration of Greek culture and Greek themes had begun to make itself felt in Rome, and a distinguished translator, Lucius Andronicus, translated many Greek plays into Latin.

**Roman culture and the Greeks** As Roman culture grew increasingly aware of the ancient Greek world, and the public platform aspect of the Roman theater morphed into an entertainment role, the training and development of a Roman theater sensibility generated a fund of actors and playwrights, and a Latin theater culture emerged, peaking in the work of such world-creators as Plautus (205 B. C.E.-164 B.C.E.) and Terence, whose dramas were created between 166-160 B.C.E. Their works acquired a characteristic national stamp, exercised itself on permanent theater platforms, dropped the chorus of Greek drama, and became major culture builders for the Romans. In addition to this foundational theatrical culture, which the Romans inherited from their early Republic years, there remains the significant first century closet-drama creator, Lucius Seneca, diplomat, advisor to the Emperor Nero.

**Comedy** Plautus composed 130 plays, of which 20 are extant. By and large they are domestic dramas, playing out into love intrigues, relations between masters and sassy slaves, and witty chit chat gathered from the rialto. Terence, from whom we inherit a handful of exquisite, intrigue filled social plays, deeply wrapped up in tales of childhood mistaken identity--the separated twins theme, lost lovers, and ultimate unexpected resolutions and rediscoveries--makes us think continually of his spiritual prototype, Shakespeare, who in many comedies plies the same themes--and in a play like *The Tempest* makes magic of the whole human drama. The typical setting of these Roman comedies illustrates the seemingly offhand elegance with which the Roman comedic creator allows his plots to flow from a real life setting in which the audience would find itself 'deeply at home.' The typical drama opens inside the atrium of a well to do house, from which movement out into and in from the street is free flowing. The master is in the back office making deals, the women are tucked away in the *gynaikeion*, the young master of the house is plotting an assignation with his chick, and in from the street, from houses opened through several doors right onto the street, comes the witty plotting pimp or family slave, with a plot by which the young master can evade the suspicions of his dad.

**The characters of comedy** It comes as no surprise, that the more or less set themes of Roman comedy are built on the behaviors of more or less set types of character. The young man on the make, avoiding dad; the pimp or slave wittily intermediating between chick and young master, the old matron shocked by the pre-marital goings on, but then the first to be reconciled to the prospect of a new marriage; the old guy with his inherited wisdom; the *miles gloriosus*, or braggadoccio soldier, who is living on tales of his past glory. With the appearance of each new character, the audience feels the shock of pleasure at recognition.

**The comic actor** While the action of Senecan tragedy was performed for court, and probably intended solely for reciting or closet acting, the robust actions of Roman comedy were display case entertainment for the man on the street in Rome, since the time of the early Roman Republic. However unlike the case in Greece, where the theatrical actor was viewed as a fairly respectable professional, with potential rights of citizenship, the Roman actor was, from the beginning, viewed as a marginal, even contemptible, member of society. Was it the instability of the actor personality, which was forever miming others, that lay behind this depreciation? If you look ahead to Diderot's *Paradoxe sur le comédien*, *Paradox of the Actor* (1777), you will see that well into our time the actor has been viewed with deep suspicion. So deep

has it typically been, that the actor has had to be buried in a common grave, not in the city cemetery with the good Christians.

**Tragedy** The nine remaining tragedies of Seneca are verse dramas, carefully and extravagantly wrought word flairs, in every case based on such crisis-filled, operatic Hellenic models as Medea, Oedipus, Phaidra, Agamemnon, or Thyestes--a rich diet of the most frenzied melodramas of the ancient Greek world. All that was restrained and complex, about the ancient Hellenic prototypes of these dramas, is thrown to the winds in these updated versions, plausibly intended only for the audience of a court with a taste for melodrama.

### **Reading**

Beacham, Richard, *The Roman Theater and its Audience*, Cambridge, 1991.

Moore, Timothy, *Roman Theater*, Cambridge, 2012.

### **Discussion questions**

In what chief ways do Greek and Roman drama differ from each other? What have they in common? Which culture seems to you to have been the more inventive, when it comes to using the background traditional material out of which it grew?

How do you explain the great influence of Menander, the Hellenistic Greek dramatist, over Roman comedy? Did Menander and the Romans share the same viewpoint toward mankind?