

## BOOK REVIEW

*Performing Greek Comedy*. By ALAN HUGHES. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. xiv + 311. Hardcover, £55.00/\$99.00. ISBN 978-1-107-00930-1.

This is an extraordinary work about the performance of Greek comedy placed in its historical and social context from the time it first “came to sight” (as Aristotle puts it) and down to Hellenistic times. Alan Hughes is an emeritus professor of theater arts (British Columbia) and formerly a theater artist himself. He was a specialist in Shakespeare and the English theater of the 19th century when he turned his attention to Greek drama and its archaeology, where he found a good number of images comparable to modern theatrical pictures. As Hughes suggests, such images of actors, costumes, sets etc., often are more revealing about the theater of their own time than texts. Moreover, as we have no description of “how the komodos sat, stood, walked, gestured, ... our best resource [for his style of movement] is the static figurines and pictures on vases that show actors in characteristic action” (147). This is the reason he decided to spend many years of studying not photos, but the dramatic monuments themselves (mostly Athenian terracottas and South Italian “phlyax” vases) in no fewer than 75 museums and private collections all over the world. As he writes, “I have never examined a comedy vase without learning something new” (xiv). His “Catalogue of objects discussed” lists more than five hundred dramatic monuments.

Unlike Classical scholars and archaeologists—since the time of Webster, Trendall and their successors—who tried to learn from teatrology in order to understand ancient dramatic monuments, modern theater critics and artists have usually moved in the opposite direction: they have been using ancient plays and theaters as vehicles for their own creative ideas and ‘original’ performances. Exceptions are few and far between, although a famous exception that confirms the rule, Peter Hall’s *Oresteia* (1981), must be mentioned in this connection.

Another unprecedented exception is Hughes’ scholarly work that began appearing in academic journals in 1996—when his seminal paper on “Comic Stages in Magna Graecia” (*Theatre Research International* 21) was published—

and eventually resulted in the publication of the comprehensive work under review.

The book includes chapters devoted to general subjects such as the origins of comedy, festivals, theaters, and comic poets, because the author apparently wants his work to be useful to theater arts students and scholars. But its most original parts are those devoted to actors and acting style, masks and costumes, gestures and body language, and women on the stage. All suggestions and conclusions are based on specific images perceptively interpreted with regard to dramatic action.

The author begins with the symbolic notion of the passage from poet to actor and from lyric to the “double consciousness” (the term is borrowed from the French actor François-Joseph Talma (1763–1826)) of the actor, who does not “build a character from within” but has to act various parts, sometimes in quick succession. Obviously, masks encouraged “doubling,” and by transferring expression from the face to the whole body also encouraged creativity in regard to an acting style that was not representational but presentational and metatheatrical. The appearance of the actors (masks with distorted features, padded costumes, artificial phalli) was emblematic of the social inferiority of comic characters as opposed to the socially superior tragic heroes and stories (*spoudaioi* and *phauloi*, respectively, as Aristotle has it) (170–1).

When discussing attitudes and gestures, Hughes uses the behaviorist term ‘emblem’ to distinguish between “symbolic, culturally specific action that expresses an idea rather than an emotion” (154), and affective gestures which are more difficult to decode. However, because ancient comedy was highly conventional in terms of its characters and plot structures, and the author has a great power of observation, his analysis of images is impressive. This is true of general examinations of the evidence, say, for comic costumes and how they were donned or manipulated on stage, or for wooden stages which could be dismantled and reassembled, but could not be carried by traveling troupes from city to city, and which, therefore, it has to be assumed belonged to the cities themselves. Occasionally, a single image may be enough to support a valuable conclusion, e.g. the “Perseus dance” on a low wooden stage illustrated on an Attic oinochoe (Athens BΣ518, c. 420), which shows that such stages originated in Attica (the same picture also offers a unique indication of a *theatron* opposite the stage).

Character types are identifiable by mask and “the generalized style of body language” (147). “Low” types may have been perceived as such “simply because they kept their bodies close to the ground. Actors cultivated this impression by

adopting an angular, knee-bending walk, or by stooping and crouching" (151). Yet "portraits from Taras show how, within the comic convention of inverted ideals, actors could set their individual stamp on old types." A wonderful example is "an old fellow named *Derkylos* [who] dances a 'soft shoe,' gracefully pointing his toes. A charming figure with black mask and tights seems to shrug, looking over his shoulder as he sidles" (150: Apulian situla, 360–350, Getty Museum, 96.AE.118).

In general, while masks often divide women into "three broad categories" (maiden, wife and crone), depictions in vase scenes situate women in relation to men in terms of modesty (158). However, in the chapter on "Comedy and Women" the author discusses the introduction of leading female roles to comedy (*Lysistrata*, *Praxagora*), which were individual cases since there was no tradition behind them; and because such heroines inverted "custom and propriety by abandoning the woman's realm (*oikos*) for the man's (*polis*)" the author wonders whether their appearance was also inverted so as to make them appear attractive in order to be taken seriously by the audience (204).

*Lysistrata* and *Praxagora* were played by Aristophanes' protagonist actors, but Hughes believes that *real* women were also used as performers in mute roles of dancers, musicians, and allegorical abstractions. He lists a dozen or so cases from Aristophanes, of which worthy of special note is the aulos player brought home by reveling Philokleon at *Wasps* 1326, because Bdelykleon recognizes her as person (not a character of the play) and mentions her name, "Dardanis." Does a reference to a real (and perhaps renowned) *aulêtris* amount to cogent evidence for her presence on stage? I remain skeptical about the possibility of mixing real young women with the grotesque and sexually repulsive old men of comedy, inasmuch as such a practice seems to me incompatible with the style of comic performance. Indeed, as Hughes elsewhere says, "given the way female characters are defined, surprisingly few scenes express even muted sexuality" (158). On the other hand, I recognize his point that certain of the above figures have some rejuvenating effect on protagonists (add *Ach.* 1198, *Eq.* 1390). Besides, sexually explicit paratheatrical performances featuring dancers and tumblers in partial or total nudity have been documented by Xenophon (*Symp.* 2.1–2, 8, etc.) and by phlyax vases, and the author refers most of them to acrobatic and mime shows, although in a few cases some relationship to comedy is also possible. Regarding the unnecessarily vexed question of whether women were admitted to theater as

spectators, Hughes reasonably sides with those who believe that they were admitted.

The value of this remarkable book lies in the close examination of a multitude of dramatic monuments interpreted, not as archaeological objects, but as pictorial evidence for the performance of Old and Middle comedy in Athens and South Italy and Sicily. This kind of approach—and achievement—was possible precisely because the author is a professional theater historian *and* self-taught—though by no means an amateur—archaeologist.

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