

BOOK REVIEW

The Stagecraft and Performance of Roman Comedy. By C.W. MARSHALL. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Pp. xiii + 320. Cloth, \$90.00. ISBN 0-521-86161-6.

Our understanding of Plautine performance is greatly hindered by the nature of the evidence. C.W. Marshall (M.) aims to enrich our appreciation of Plautus by offering a new synthesis of the limited evidence surrounding the production and performance of Plautus' comedies (and, while Terence makes brief appearances, M. focuses on Plautus). Building on the studies of Moore and Slater,¹ M. distinguishes himself by his creative reconstruction of the backstage *Realien* of the theater, and by his perspective on comedic performance. M. brings his expertise in theatrical production and improvisation to his critical work, and this greatly informs his understanding of the Roman stage.² Herein also lie some of the shortcomings of his work, as his visualization of the performance of Plautus' plays sometimes seems more at home on a modern stage than on the temporary wooden structures of Republican Rome.

In his introduction, M. elucidates Plautus' ability to blend literary and performance genres into a dramatic format with broad appeal to his audience. He traces the primary influences on Roman comedy (Greek New Comedy, *fabulae Atellanae* and mime), and discusses their impact on Plautus. An ambitious first chapter, "The Business of Comedy," investigates how financial considerations affected performance space, the troupe, set, costumes and even the audience. This chapter contains a wealth of information, and M. in the end favors a sparse stage with minimal props to accommodate the vicissitudes of performance. His enlightening discussion of the composition of the audience shows how they actively engage in performance, and how Plautus caters to the tastes of different social classes. Here, M.'s own experiences as a producer of the plays enliven his examples and lead to plausible conclusions.

Chapter 2, "Actors and Roles," treats the activity of Plautus' troupe and the importance of actors on stage. M. again stresses the economic pressures on the troupe, which "is competing for a limited resource (contracts) and must offer a product that will generate wealth (a satisfied audience) so that future magistrates will make future purchases from the same source" (p. 84). A small troupe would lead to the doubling of roles, and M. generates a list indicating how many performers were needed in each play (pp. 109-

¹ N.W. Slater, *Plautus in Performance: the Theatre of the Mind* (Princeton, 1985); T.J. Moore, *The Theater of Plautus: Playing to the Audience* (Austin, 1998).

² For more information about M.'s contemporary productions of ancient comedies and tragedies, see his website MASC (Modern Actors Staging Classics): <http://www2.cnrs.ubc.ca/masc/>.

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11). This leads to speculation that one or two actors from the troupe would enjoy celebrity status and thus deliver a majority of the lines. M. claims that the audience “will acknowledge and reward challenges accepted by an actor, that it wants to see an actor exhibit dramatic range, and that it wants to identify star actors beneath their masks” (pp. 114–15). When M. considers the doubling of roles, however, he does not discuss how this might affect the play’s reception; e.g., in the *Pseudolus* the actor playing the eponymous character also plays the cook in M.’s system, but there is little discussion of how this bears on the spectator’s interpretation of the play (p. 117).

The doubling of roles necessarily raises the question of masks, to which M. devotes his third chapter.³ Here, he displays a sensitivity to performance often lacking in critics who address this inveterate issue. Masks do not limit the emotional register of the actors, but rather highlight the emotional significance of their physical movements and posture. M. asserts that Atellan farces broadly influenced masks, especially in regard to the presentation of the pimp, and argues that masks were more individualized, and characters less stereotyped, than might have been assumed from Pollux (*Onomasticon* 4.143–54). This leads to a nuanced discussion of the comic potential of an individualized slave’s mask in the *Pseudolus* and of the way masks amplify the themes of slavery and freedom in the *Captivi*.

In his fourth chapter, M. analyzes four aspects of stage action: focus, pace, tone and routines. He provides examples of the importance of the physical reality of performance, of how “some interpretations of the play were actively encouraged, and others were discouraged or even precluded” via stage action (p. 187). M. believes that a “breathless” pace enhances the comic nature of the performance, and contends that the juxtaposition of dramatic time and actual time could be played for laughs in (esp.) the *Menaechmi* and the *Andria*. He questions whether there is room for seriousness in Plautus, but his conclusions about tone are hampered by his primary example, Alcumena in the *Amphitruo*, about whom he equivocates, treating her as simultaneously serious and comic. When he turns to the various routines of Plautine comedy, e.g., *servus currens*, M. is on surer ground, and his discussion reveals how Plautus creates humor through these *lazzi*.

The final two chapters of the book are the most speculative and thought-provoking. Chapter 5, “Music and Metre,” offers many insights on the effects of music on the structure and movement of the

³ His account fundamentally follows that of D. Wiles, *The Masks of Menander* (Cambridge, 1991), but M. believes that “some refinements are necessary when the Greek New Comic tradition is transferred to Rome” (p. 126 n. 3).

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plays. M. argues that alteration between unaccompanied and accompanied meters created structural units the audience recognized as the building blocks of the play. M. traces these “arcs” through Plautus’ plays, and asserts that this patterning of music and meter shapes the audience’s interpretation of scenes and characters. Likewise, M. views the *tibicen* as an integral part of the performance, and reveals his influence on the pacing and architecture of plays. While it is difficult to prove exactly *how* music aids the interpretation of Roman comedy, M. attempts to show its influence in the *Rudens* and the *Pseudolus*.

Improvisation occurs when actors diverge from a script. In his final chapter, M. discusses the role of improvisation in contemporary theater and theatrical workshops, before delving into how improvisation might have affected Plautus’ plays. M. places an extraordinary amount of creative freedom in the hands of the actors, and believes that the texts that we possess of Plautus’ plays represent a collaboration between the poet and the actors in his troupe. For M., performance precedes text, and it is through performance that a (tran)script is created: “Plautus is crafting a play, constructed from different pieces over time with the help of his associates, and not simply ‘writing’ a document that remains unchanged” (p. 263). This is M.’s most radical idea, which he supports through Shakespearean parallels as well as marks of improvisation in the text. M. destabilizes the text and the idea of authorship, and favors instead a fluid view of the comedies that survive under Plautus’ name. While most critics believe that improvisation occurred in Plautus to wring out the most from successful comedic routines, this elevation of actors may unfairly diminish the author’s own status.

M.’s work may raise more questions than it provides definitive answers. He offers imaginative solutions to issues such as the role of masks, the stage building, improvisation and music, but these are often only plausible hypotheses, stitched together from the scanty source material and M.’s own modern productions. While this work should be read by anyone interested in the performance of Roman comedy, it reveals the formidable difficulties in determining how performance not only affects, but creates meaning in Plautine comedy.

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