

A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE FORUM



Book by Burt Shevelove & Larry Gelbart
Music & lyrics by Stephen Sondheim

Williamstown Theatre Festival

June 2010

Directed by Jessica Stone

Resources Compiled by Rachel Lerner-Ley

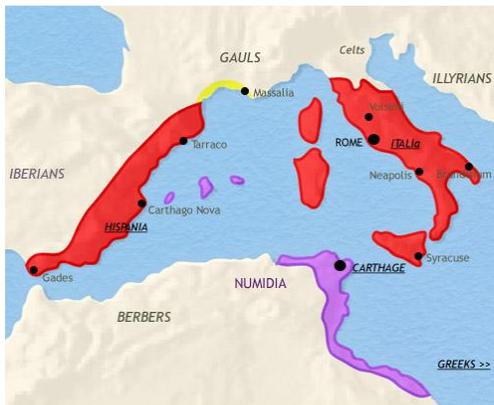
THIS YEAR IN HISTORY

ROME 200 BCE

SPQR: Rome is a republic. The most powerful governing body is the senate. The motto of the republic is *senatus populusque romanus* (the Senate and the People of Rome). SPQR is everywhere: etched on public buildings and public works (aqueducts), plastered all over the forum, and popping up on coins. 200 BCE marks about the midpoint of the Roman Republic, which was founded in 509 BCE. The collapse of the Roman Republic (and the stuff that makes for great Shakespearean history tragedies) and the rise of the Roman Empire with its succession of illustrious and infamous emperors is about 150 years down the road.



VICTORY! paves the way to becoming a world leader and imperialism



In 201 BCE, Rome successfully defeated Hannibal and Carthage, the powerful enemy empire located in North Africa. The Second Punic War—there were three total—was a close call for the Romans; Hannibal had led a powerful northern campaign, attacking Rome from the Alps (assisted by some elephants). Only when the Roman army changed tactics, went on the offensive, and attacked Carthage's African holdings did they achieve victory.

The defeat of Carthage allowed Rome to acquire more territory along the Mediterranean, such as Sicily and parts of Eastern Spain. It also showed the world that Rome was a military power to be reckoned with.

Now, in 200 BCE, Rome is on its way to becoming an imperialistic world leader. Roman territory has expanded immensely, and the Roman military is a constant presence on the Mediterranean Sea. Outposts are being built in newly conquered Carthage, and the Roman army has begun fighting the Second Macedonian War against the Greeks. Riches and spoils of war are pouring in, leading to more luxurious lifestyles amongst the Roman elite. The defeat of the Greeks 3 years later will not only add a large expanse of eastern territory, but will also inundate Rome with elements of Grecian culture.

City of Rome: At this point in time, Rome is over 500 years old. The city sits along the Tiber River and contains the famous 7 hills on which sit the homes of the elite, temples, and government buildings. Streets are paved with raised stones. Living quarters are made of stone and are either 1-2 story private houses or multi-level apartment buildings. Oftentimes, the ground floor is occupied by a store. These stores pour out onto the streets which are filled with people selling their wares. There are no street numbers so you have to rely on description to find a residence. The forum is the center of the city, home to religious and government institutions as well as large open air market. Aqueducts—at this point mainly underground—deliver water to the city, allowing for many fountains and bath houses. Like any city, graffiti of all sorts appears on buildings.

Slavery and Prostitution: Slaves are ubiquitous. Almost every household, rich and poor, has at least one slave (some estimate that the ratio of free to slave was 1:3 by the end of the republic!). Slaves are typically former prisoners of war that were sold at markets held in the forum. Children of slaves automatically became slaves. Slaves could buy their freedom by saving up the small allowance doled out by their master or could be granted it by their master as a reward for good service. Slave-owning is a status symbol, and so many ex-slaves go on to purchase slaves of their own. Slaves wear brown tunics made of coarse fabric. Like slavery, prostitution is accepted as a necessary social institution with its own set of laws (social and governmental). Prostitutes are of the lowest social order.



Father Knows Best: The Roman family is dictated by the notion of *patria potestas*. The father has complete control over all members and aspects of his family: wife, children, children-in-law, grandchildren, slaves, and property. A father may emancipate his son, allowing him to become the *paterfamilias* of his own family.

Midlife Crisis at 20? Average female life expectancy is 34. Average male life expectancy is 46.5.

Marriage: Girls are married off between the ages of 12 and 14. Their future husbands can be as young as 14 and as old as...well, there's no upper limit. The girl is given away by her father with a dowry that can be returned if there is divorce. The marriage is a signed contract, and weddings include feasts and processions. An important custom: the groom must carry the bride over the threshold of their home.



Drink up!: Wine is the beverage of choice for everyone and is served at almost all meals. A typical dinner for Romans is an egg dish served with sweet wine followed by a main entrée (usually fish or poultry) served with wine. Dessert is fruit served with—you guessed it—wine!

TOGA! TOGA! Men wear knee length white tunics covered by white togas. If a man holds a position of power, he has a purple stripe along his tunic and toga. Women wear long white tunics with sleeves. Over the tunics, they wear a stola: a draped dress dyed in a solid color. Togas are always worn in public; not necessarily worn in the home. Sandals are casual, at-home wear; shoes are outdoor, proper attire.

V's are W's: Latin is the language of the day. When spoken, "v" is pronounced as "w."

Translation and Notes on Character Names

Prologus: prologue of play or the actor who delivers prologue of play (Latin)

Protean: Proteus is a Greek god of the sea and a shape shifter. He could foretell the future and would shift forms in order to avoid answering questions

Senex: old; old man (Latin)

Domina: lady of the house; owner; wife (Latin)

Hero: a delicious sandwich; *heros* (Latin)

Hysterium: In Latin, *hystericus* means “having a gynecological condition.” In Greek, *hysteria* means womb. *Hysterical* is derived from both these ancient terms.

Lycus: *Lycus* was used to name rivers in Greece. It is thought to be derived from the idea that a torrential river rushing downhill being similar to a wolf—*lykos* in Greek—chasing its prey. In mythology, Lycus provided hospitality and entertainment to Hercules and in return received military assistance and protection.

Pseudolus: tricky trickster; also the title character of a play by Plautus

Tintinabula: bell (Latin)

Panacea: cure-all (Latin)

Geminae: twins (Latin)

Vibrata: vibrating (Latin)

Gymnasia: gymnastic (from the Latin *gymnasticus*)

Philia: love (Greek) or daughter (bastardized form of *filia* in Latin)

Erronius: wandering (derived from Latin verb *errorare*)

Miles Glorious: boastful/proud soldier (Latin). Also, the name of a Plautus play!



ROMAN THEATRE

“If we are to understand Roman theatre, it is essential to recognize from the outset that drama in the Greek sense played only a small role in it, since it was always dominated by variety entertainment...we can probably grasp the essence of Roman Theatre more readily by comparing it with American television programming, for it encompassed acrobatics, trained animals, jugglers, athletic events, music and dance, dramatic skits, short farces, and full-length dramas. The Roman public was as fickle as our own: like channel-switchers, they frequently left one event for another and demanded diversions capable of withstanding all competition....

It should not be forgotten that the theatre in Rome almost always was associated with festivals, most of them religious... Thus, theatrical offerings (regardless of content) were long thought to be pleasing to (or capable of propitiating) the gods.”

-Brockett & Hildy, *History of the Theatre*, 9th edition

PLAUTUS & HIS COMEDIES



*wrote comedies between 205 and 184 BCE

*based off of Greek “New Comedy”—domestic comedies focusing on love affairs, misrepresentation, mischievous slaves; set in Greece

*farce that featured great amounts of word-play and riddles

*humor lies in jokes and puns; at times, more focus on setting up a joke than moving the action forward

*meta-theatrical: references to the progress of the play or reminders that the play is set in Greece

*written in everyday common vernacular Latin

*included *cantica*: operatic arias and duets; didn’t move the plot forward and could pop anywhere about anything

*music is a large element; much of the play is accompanied (usually by a flute)

--adapted from *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd edition

A Brief Run-Down on the Long History of All-Male Acting Troupes

As Old as Theatre Itself

Dithyrambs—improvised song and choral numbers—are considered to be the origins of theatre. These were performed at Grecian festivals. There would be two: one for men and one for boys.

In Ancient Greece and Rome, theatrical entertainment was tied to festivals to honor the Gods. With so many festivals going on a year, troupes of actors formed and traveled from city to city, festival to festival.



In Greece, there were typically 3-5 actors, plus a chorus of 12-15 for each play. A Roman play typically consisted of between 3-5 actors with doubling in roles. All actors were male and wore masks. Emphasis was on language. Much time was devoted to recruiting, cultivating, and training choruses.

Once the Roman Empire fell, Christianity took hold on Europe. Festivals to Gods disappeared, and with them, the majority of traveling theatre troupes. However, the church soon adopted theatre for its own uses. Liturgical Drama and Morality plays featuring members of the church and choir boys became a main form of entertainment.

Elizabethan England—the height of All-Male Acting Troupes

From 1572 to 1642, there were over 100 acting troupes in England! The troupes were all male and had names such as The Queen's Men, The Admiral's Men, and The Chamberlain's Men. The troupes were self-governing with a sharing plan in which actors were not only investor-producers in the company, but also took on other roles such as business manager. Troupes commissioned their own plays, created and maintained stock costumes and sets. They also took young male apprentices under wing and provided training to this future generation of actors.

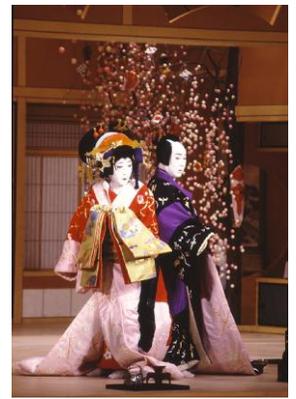
Accounts from the Elizabethan era describe the moving truth with which these male actors portrayed all characters: male, female, supernatural. This era featured the works of Marlowe and Shakespeare.

In 1642, civil war broke out in England. The Puritans took charge of the nation, and the theatre was shut down. In 1660, the Puritans lost power, and the English Restoration began. Theatre returned. This time, however, women were allowed on the stage and the most prominent form was the comedy of manners that centered on domestic life and strife.

Noh and Kabuki Theatre in Japan—classic, honored, and treasured art forms

Noh: a form of “musical dance drama” developed in the 14th c. that features singing and choreography. It has traditionally been an all-male art form and is still practiced that way today. It involves masks and features a highly stylized form of movement which requires years of study to perfect (students begin learning it as children).

Kabuki: a form of theatre that centers on “dance:” “rhythmical movement, studied posture, and conventionalized gesture.” Acting consists of a mixture of speaking and dancing. Kabuki originally began as a female art form. However, performances became too seductive and the government banned women from the stage. It then was performed by boys, but that too proved to be too seductive. Finally, it became a male art form; men were required to shave their heads and not rely on “physical charm.” Actors come from acting families—it’s hereditary!—and begin studying the form as children.



All-Male Troupes Today

All-male troupes (and all-female troupes) are far and few between these days in English language theatre. Often times, all-male casts are pulled together for a production of Shakespeare or plays from the classical world. Most often, the driving idea behind this choice is historical, to re-create for contemporary audiences the experience of classical audiences when viewing the original work.

However, it isn’t always necessarily for the sake of the history. There is also great artistic merit to single-sex productions. Edward Hall, artistic director of the renowned and acclaimed all-male troupe Propeller Theatre, has this to say when asked why he directs all-male productions [the production he is referring to is *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*]:

“I always say you have to play a character first. If you’re playing Hamlet or a woman, the act of acting is exactly the same. You are casting yourself into somebody’s shoes who is not you. So the audience they become more aware of the act that the actor is engaging in when they do a gender swap because they know that man is not a woman. So they know he’s pretending to be something he’s not. When that man plays Hamlet and I don’t know that man, I don’t really know how much of it is him and how much of it is Hamlet. So quite often people go “oh you’re totally different in real life” or “I had no idea you were like that” And people get obsessed with what is the actor [sic] or the celebrity really like in real life? That’s why we like to watch them going through the jungle eating creepy crawlies because we get more of an idea of who they really are. So it just requires getting in touch with the right side of your sensibility. And the fact that an all-male company does a play about love is extremely, extremely interesting because Shakespeare comments all the time on the nature of men and on the nature of women in relationships, love, and marriage. And if there is one thing everyone in the audience has had an experience of, it’s a relationship with another human being. And when men are playing women comment on how fickle men are it gets quite ironic in a way it might not do if it was a woman playing a woman commenting on how fickle men are.”

