

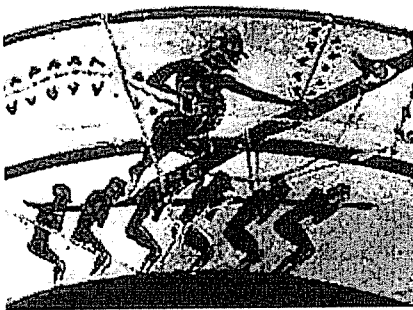
THE ORIGINS OF COMEDY

The origins of comedy, like those of tragedy, are very uncertain. All that is possible is to point out probable connections with comedy as we know it and the meager evidence that predates the beginning of comedy.

The Phallic Procession

Aristotle has his theory about the origin of comedy, but he is most likely doing no more than giving an educated guess. His evidence probably was not much more reliable than what is available to us today. Aristotle claims that the origin of comedy can be traced to "those who lead off the phallic songs (*phallika*)."¹ The phallic procession to a cult center, followed by a sacrifice, was a common feature of Dionysiac celebrations in the Greek countryside. These processions were characterized by obscenities and verbal abuse. This theory would certainly help explain the obscene nature of the first form of comedy, Old Comedy, in which actors usually wore a red leather phallus and often engaged in obscene dialogue. Another ancient author, Semonides of Deos, writes of phallus-carriers who made fun of their audience. It might be possible to see the seeds of the parabasis² of Old Comedy, in which the comic chorus of 24 addressed the audience directly, but the criticism of the audience is not the only function of the chorus in this part of the play.

The Phallic Procession and the *Komos*



Left is a procession of phallos carriers. Six men are carrying a phallus pole, while a larger figure above them is riding a thicker phallus pole. The riding figure has a protruding stomach and rear end, which are probably the result of wearing a padded costume. This physical characteristic identifies the larger man as a komast, i.e., one who participates in the *kômos*, a procession of drunken partygoers behaving in a festive manner. Perhaps the closest modern equivalent of the *kômos* is Mardi Gras in New Orleans. The connections between the *kômos* and Greek Old Comedy as we know it are persuasive. The word *kômos* seems to supply the most likely etymology of the word 'com-edy', i.e., song of the *kômos* (*kômos* + *ôidê* = 'song'). The festive spirit of the *kômos* is also apparent in Old Comedy. The padded costume of the komast has its parallel in the similar costume of the comic actor. Perhaps, the distortion of the human figure by fat struck the Greeks as a good symbol of festivity, during which overindulgence in food and drink was natural. The Greeks, who admired the lean and muscular male figure, no doubt found the fat paunch and backside of the komast and the comic actor laughable. The Greeks were not alone in this attitude. America has had a long tradition of fat comedians such as Fatty Arbuckle, Oliver Hardy, Lou Costello, Buddy Hackett, Jackie Gleason, Zero Mostel, John Belushi, John Candy, Louis Anderson, and most recently, Roseanne, Chris Farley, and

Drew Carey.

1. Phallus means 'penis' or a symbolic representation of a penis carried in a ritual procession. It should, however, be noted that all manuscripts except one read "those who lead off the trivial business (*phaulika*)," but modern editors unanimously give *phallika*.

2. The parabasis was a long choral passage in Old Comedy, both recited and sung, directly addressed to the audience.

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COMEDY IN PERFORMANCE

Comedy had its place alongside tragedy in the Theater of Dionysus during the City Dionysia at the end of March. For most of the fifth century five comedies were presented at this festival with a probable reduction to three during the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC), when the festival was limited to a three day period. On each of the three mornings a tragic tetralogy (three tragedies and a satyr play) was presented with one comedy each afternoon. Outside of the war period it is not certain whether the five comedies were all performed on one day or spread out over five days.

There was another Dionysiac festival in late January at which both tragedy and comedy were performed, but comedy was more dominant: the Lenaea. During the fifth century two tragedians presented their plays at the Lenaea in comparison to three comic playwrights. The number of comedies was increased to five by the third century BC.



The scene on the left is the earliest known depiction (420 BC) of a performance of an Old Comedy. The actor on the stage is portraying the mythological character Perseus, who can be identified by the scythe in his left hand (used to decapitate Medusa) and a bag hanging from his left arm (used to store Medusa's head). He seems to be dancing and using his right hand to look into the distance (perhaps to sight Andromeda, whom he rescued from a sea monster). Although he appears to be naked, he

is wearing a skin-tight costume as the lines on his wrist and ankles indicate. The costume seems padded, although that would be clearer in profile, and has an attached phallus. This is a typical costume of the actor in Old Comedy. The artist has eliminated the orchestra so that he can depict the first row (*prohedria*) of the audience. The two seated figures could represent the audience in general or more specifically the priest of Dionysus with a priestess of some goddess or Dionysus himself along with his love, Ariadne.

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COMEDY IN PERFORMANCE



This vase painting, dating from 420 to 410 BC, may be a depiction of the famous contest (*agon*) between the Greater and Lesser Arguments in the *Clouds*. An unidentified ancient scholar writing in the margin of a manuscript of this play (called a 'scholiast') claimed that the two actors portraying Greater and Lesser Arguments were dressed up as fighting cocks and fought in a wicker cage. What the scholiast probably meant is that the two fighting cocks were brought on stage in a wicker cage and then were released to fight, as would be

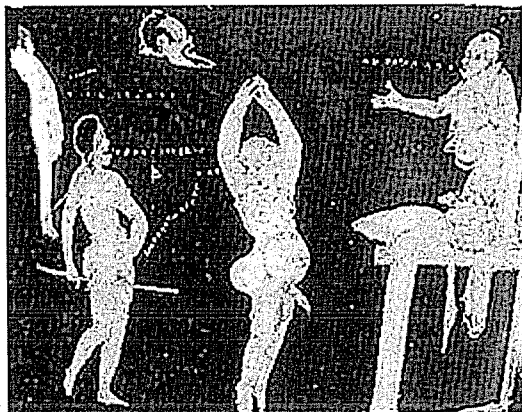
normal in cockfighting even today. Note that the artist has not depicted the two cocks as confined by any enclosure. Here the two cocks, accompanied by the music of a double-aulos player,¹ show an appropriate amount of aggression against each other. Note that these two roosters have very human phalluses.

1. The double-aulos (an oboe-like instrument) is the normal instrument used to accompany choral and solo songs in tragedy and comedy.

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COMEDY IN PERFORMANCE



This depiction of a comic performance dates from 400 BC and shows actors wearing costumes and masks characteristic of Old Comedy. An old man wearing a costume with a protruding stomach and posterior and with an attached phallus is standing in the orchestra on tiptoe almost in the manner of a ballerina. A younger man also wearing a padded costume with a phallus stands behind him carrying a stick. Both the older and younger man, like the previous depiction of Perseus, give the appearance of being naked. The letters parallel to his mouth indicating his utterance are nonsense, at least from the point of view of the Greek audience: *notaretteblo*. This nonsense may indicate that the younger man is supposed to be a foreigner, and because he is carrying a stick, may reveal him as one of the Sycthians who served as policemen in Athens. On the right, an old woman stands on the stage and says *parexo*, a Greek word which seems to mean here: "I will hand [him] over", i.e., "I will hand over my slave to be punished or to be tortured before giving evidence in court." This would also explain the peculiar posture of the slave, who is presented as being suspended by a rope in the air for the purpose of a caning with a stick. Since there was no structure in the orchestra from which a rope could be hung, the actor portraying the slave just mimed being suspended by a rope.

Above and to the left of the slave is a comic mask of a slave and oddly, the figure above and to the left of the 'policeman' is labeled as a 'tragedian'. Why a tragedian was thought by the artist to be appropriate to this scene is unknown to us, but was probably clear to the audience for whom this painting was intended.

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COMEDY IN PERFORMANCE



This final scene from a comic performance depicts a slave (left) and his master (right). One can note the similarity of the slave's mask here to the slave mask suspended in the air in the previous painting. This vase dates from the third quarter of the fourth century BC, when Greek comedy was evolving from Middle into New Comedy. We no longer see the ridiculously protruding stomachs and posteriors. The "naked look" is gone. The actors are dressed in everyday attire, although there is one holdover from Old Comedy: the red leather phalluses.

The slave is carrying in his left hand a *phiale* (a flat vessel for pouring libations to gods) and fillets (ribbons usually used as a religious symbol) and in his right hand, a *situla* (an urn used for drawing water). These objects are probably intended for use in some festive religious occasion. The dramatic point of the painting is that the slave is reluctant to go along with his master, who pulls his slave by the wrist. The reason for the slave's reluctance is unknown to us, for we do not know the play which this painting illustrates.

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ROMAN COMEDY

The Romans had native forms of drama like the Atellan farces, which were improvised by masked actors impersonating stock characters like the glutton and the clown. There were also exchanges of obscene dialogue at harvests festivals (Fescennine verses), perhaps similar in spirit to the Greek *komos* and phallic processions. These kinds of comedy, however, were primitive in comparison with Greek comedy. When the Romans became acquainted with Greek culture in the third century BC, they were drawn to the New Comedies that were so popular in that era. New Comedy, which lacked the specific political and social references of Old Comedy translated well to Rome. Roman playwrights began to adapt Greek New Comedies for the Roman stage. The two most famous Roman comedians were Plautus (254-184 BC) and Terence (185-159 BC). All surviving Roman comedies were written by these two authors. Their plays were much more than just mere translations of the Greek originals. Plautus was especially original in his adaptations, turning them into musical comedies.

The Romans called these adaptations of Greek comedies *fabulae palliatae* ('plays in a Greek cloak'). The *fabulae palliatae* had characters with Greek names in Greek settings, but the audience understood that the characters were essentially Roman. This practice allowed the playwright to turn Roman *mores* upside down without upsetting the audience or undermining Roman morality. Perhaps the most common inversion of Roman values in Roman comedy is the mockery of the father. In real Roman society, the father's power (*patria potestas*) was legally undisputed. A father had the power of life and death over his family and his household (especially slaves). In comedy, however, the son with the help of a brash slave regularly outwit the father and make a fool of him. In many plays, the slave is the central character who dominates the action.¹ The Greek setting of the plays and the Greek names of the characters made this situation palatable to Roman audiences and authorities.

Below is a depiction of comic slave, possibly from a play by Plautus. With his left hand he is giving the traditional sign of the horns to ward off the evil eye.



1. The comic slave who is smarter than his master has had a long history and has a number of descendants in the form of servants in novels and movie and television comedies, like Jeeves, Hazel, Mary Poppins, Benson, Mr. Belvedere, and the Nanny.

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