

DIDASKALIA 

The Journal for Ancient Performance



*Didaskalia is an electronic journal dedicated to the study of all aspects of ancient Greek and Roman performance.*

# DIDASKALIA

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## About Didaskalia

Didaskalia (διδασκαλία) is the term used since ancient times to describe the work a playwright did to teach his chorus and actors the play. The official records of the dramatic festivals in Athens were the διδασκαλία. *Didaskalia* now furthers the scholarship of the ancient performance.

*Didaskalia* is an English-language, online publication about the performance of Greek and Roman drama, dance, and music. We publish peer-reviewed scholarship on performance and reviews of the professional activity of artists and scholars who work on ancient drama.

We welcome submissions on any aspect of the field. If you would like your work to be reviewed, please write to [editor@didaskalia.net](mailto:editor@didaskalia.net) at least three weeks in advance of the performance date. We also seek interviews with practitioners and opinion pieces. For submission guidelines, go to [didaskalia.net](http://didaskalia.net).

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## Note

*Didaskalia* is an online journal. This print representation of Volume 8 is an inadequate approximation of the web publication at [didaskalia.net](http://didaskalia.net), which includes sound, video, and live hyperlinks.

# Storm in a Teacup: an Exercise in Performance Reception in Twenty-First-Century Israel

Lisa Maurice  
Bar-Ilan University

## Introduction

Over the last decade, interest in classical reception has spawned various sub-disciplines, one of which is performance reception. When, in the spring semester of 2009, I taught a course entitled “Ancient theatre workshop” at Bar-Ilan University in Israel, I seized the opportunity to focus on the actual production and staging of ancient drama, and to work with an example of such reception. The course was open to all students, both classicists and those with no background in the subject seeking a “general” course, and the aim was to produce a play to be performed at the end of semester. Writing and producing this play therefore provided an opportunity to witness at close hand how a group of 21st-century Israeli students interacted with and received ancient performance in creating their own modern drama.



Figure 4: *The Mirror*

## I. Roman Comedy and Modern Scholarship

Intellectual and academic critics have often regarded Plautus as a crude barbariser of Greek comedy; indeed his work was primarily studied in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a means to understand lost Greek New Comedy. Despite the comic power and exuberance of Plautine comedy, and despite the fact that Plautus’ influence on later writers, particularly Shakespeare and Molière, was considerable, it was not until Fraenkel’s groundbreaking work that he began to be regarded as a figure worth studying in his own right.

Over the last twenty years, however, Plautus has begun to be appreciated as a self-conscious and sophisticated comic. Works by scholars such as Niall Slater (2000), Timothy Moore (1998) and Richard Beacham (1991) have taken a performance-based approach to the study of Plautus, an approach which has particularly revealed and stressed Plautus’ metatheatrical style. Building on these studies, C. W. Marshall (2006) utilised his own expertise in theatrical production and improvisation in attempting to reconstruct the backstage conditions of Plautine comedy in Republican Rome.



Figure 1: *Monologue of Sa'ar (Ariel Drori)*  
(photo: Hana Leider)

As a result of such approaches to Plautus, I decided to focus upon Plautine comedy, and in particular the staging of Roman comedy, while running this workshop. Teaching the course gave me an opportunity to test and experience how the reality of staging affects a written text, and specifically how it might have

constrained and changed Plautine comedy. I was interested in discovering whether theories put forward about Roman comedy actually rang true in production, particularly those ideas concerning metatheatricality and the crafty slave of Plautine tradition (Segal 1987, McCarthy 2000, Parker 1989).

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## II. Performance Reception

With this focus upon performance, producing a modern version of a Plautine comedy was an interesting experiment in performance reception. Edith Hall has summed up the concept of performance reception as follows:

Performance Reception is as a subcategory of what has conventionally been called 'The Classical Tradition,' 'The Nachleben,' or 'The Reception' of ancient Greece and Rome. The performances . . . have all involved audiences responding to performers using their bodies, voices, and/or musical instruments in a visual or aural representation of material derived from an ancient Greek or Roman source . . . Performance Reception, at its most reductively defined, is the study of the process by which A impersonates a B derived from a classical prototype before C. . . . [I]t is the dynamic triangular relationship between ancient text, performer, and his or her audience that above all distinguishes Performance Reception from the study of the ways in which ancient texts have been received elsewhere. (Hall 2004:52)

The process of production allowed the group to investigate the relationship between text and performance in a practical manner that reflected current thinking about the nature of performance in general, and the reception of classical performance in particular. It also highlighted elements in Roman comedy that were particularly relevant to a particular group of students in twenty-first century Israeli society, demonstrating how the society in which the production takes place must invariably influence the production itself.

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## III. The Production Process

### Underlying philosophy and approaches

Obviously one aim of the course was to put on a final performance that the audience would enjoy, but since the intention was also to investigate the issues of acting and staging from the performers' point of view, it was important to create a dynamic project that might be comparable in some way to the experience of producing and acting in a Plautine play. It was therefore important to try and enable students as far as possible to experience first hand all the elements and stages involved in dramatic production. Considerable stress was laid on the equivalent Roman process, as far as it is currently understood, and how that must have differed from the modern experience. In this respect I relied to a great extent on Easterling and Hall (2002) and Marshall (2006). Also useful were Ley (2007:268-285), McCart (2007) and Beacham (2007); Goldhill (2007), although concerned with tragedy rather than comedy, was also valuable. Overall, far more emphasis was placed on experiencing the production process than on producing something of a professional level, which would have been a daunting prospect for those with no previous background in drama.

### Structure and organization of the course

A total of fifteen students participated in the course, which was thirteen weeks long, and met once a week for 90 minutes at a time. Students were expected to participate fully and to take an active part in some aspect of the production, either as actors or in backstage roles responsible for costume, set, stage managing, lighting and so on. Each student was also to keep, and submit at the end of the course, a journal documenting their ideas and progress from beginning to end.

Since one of my main aims was to recreate the actor/backstage experience of a dramatic troupe, I stressed

from the very first meeting that the work was to be collaborative and team led, although naturally, as course instructor, I had certain ideas and theories I wished to test. For that reason, I took on the nominal role of director, and acted as *domina gregis*. I nevertheless endeavoured not to impose ideas on the class, especially in early meetings.

One exception was the decision, made before the course started, to work on Roman comedy rather than Greek comedy or tragedy. This decision was in part influenced by my own research interests but also by the fact that some of the students had taken a course I had taught in the previous semester on Roman comedy and so had some background in the subject. Despite this, some of the students had no, or very limited, knowledge of Roman comedy. I therefore devoted the first two weeks to an intensive introduction to this topic, explaining central concepts of Plautine drama in class and assigning students to read several Plautine comedies in translation. The plays read were the *Epidicus*, *Miles Gloriosus*, *Pseudolus*, *Aulularia*, and *Menaechmi*, a selection dictated for the most part by the works available in Hebrew translation. Here it also quickly became obvious how much the standard of translation influenced students' enjoyment of a text; the plays which existed in the excellent translations by Dvora Gilula were far more popular than the dated versions of the *Epidicus* and *Aulularia* that were available. By the third class, the students had a very basic understanding of the genre, and discussion began.

At this stage debate focussed on which play to produce, in which language it should be performed (Latin or Hebrew) and how to make our production an authentic experience in some way. As a result of these discussions, the rather surprising decision was made to write our own play, using the elements of Roman comedy and translating them into modern Israeli society. While the class enjoyed the comedies they had read, and were excited by the prospect of performing a Plautine comedy, they felt that the effect achieved by producing one of the texts as it stood would be far from authentic, since the audience understanding and reactions would be very different from those of the Republican Romans. It was decided to try and create an effect similar to that imagined to have been created by Plautus by translating elements of Plautine comedy to modern contemporary equivalents. The aim was to attempt to create a performance that was Plautine in nature, as far as modern scholarship understands it, rather than to make the Roman comedies comprehensible and relevant to the contemporary audience by updating them in some way. Again, this decision was influenced by the stress on performance rather than text; although the students agreed that the texts of Roman comedy were often still funny in themselves, they felt that in performance much would be lost on an audience lacking the background knowledge to appreciate the play. Ironically, they considered that without the constraints of a particular character or plot, they could reproduce the feel of a Plautine comedy more authentically.

As a first stage, the class brainstormed the various elements of Roman comedy that should be incorporated: stock characters, coincidence and hyperbole were all listed as essential (Duckworth 1994:236-71, 146-59, 336). Metatheatricity and a carefully constructed plot (Maurice 2005, 2006, 2007) were included in the list, as a result of earlier class discussions and secondary reading. Other plot elements, such as mistaken identity and recognition tokens, were also addressed at some length (Duckworth 1994:147-8, 151-60). It should be stressed that while my original presentation of Roman comedy in the first classes must have played some role in selecting these elements, they were not director-selected, but unanimously (and in many cases vigorously) argued for by the students themselves. The most popular of the Roman stock characters were the *servus callidus* (crafty slave), *miles gloriosus* (swaggering soldier), *amator fervidus* (young lover) and, somewhat surprisingly to me at least, the comic chef. Another brainstorming session then took place, in which students suggested equivalent stereotypes in Israeli society that could be adapted to fit our needs.

Over the next week, each student wrote a possible plot outline and summary. These were then circulated to the entire class and discussed at the following meeting. One in particular was chosen and refined until

a workable plot and characters were agreed upon. Each student then undertook actually to write one or two scenes, using the plot structure outlined in class, and attempting as far as possible to base the dialogue on the Roman comedies they had read. This was done with varying degrees of success proportionate to the knowledge each student had of Roman comedy, as well as to their own creative abilities. It is striking to note how far the text that was produced at this stage differed from the final version, as changes and rehearsal improvisations were incorporated into the play as it developed. In the following class the text was further developed and polished, and the various dramatic roles chosen by the students. Those students who did not undertake acting roles volunteered for other responsibilities, such as music, stage management, costume, make-up, props and set design and preparation. In this way, every student was actively (although not necessarily equally) involved in some way in the production.

The remaining weeks of the course were devoted to rehearsal and to preparation of props, scenery and costume. In an effort to keep the focus on visual performance and staging, students also studied *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (Cyrino 2005:159-75) and examined stills from other modern Plautine productions in order to better understand the effect that was intended to be created. In particular, C. W. Marshall's productions (<http://www2.cnrs.ubc.ca/masc/>) as well as J. H. Starks's staging of the *Poenulus* (Starks 1997) were invaluable. These studies were useful in helping students visualise the lively nature of Roman comedy and in enabling them to understand the pace and exuberance required.

### **Audience and student feedback**

The performance itself was attended by a group of students, members of the classics department and a few other interested parties. A programme was handed out to the audience before the show, outlining the main elements of Roman comedy and setting out the aims of the production. In general the play was well received, and the question-and-answer session held after the performance reflected the audience's interest and enthusiasm.

This enthusiasm was echoed by the students themselves. Almost without exception, the evaluation section in their production journals stressed how much they had enjoyed the experience and how much they had learnt, especially when compared with other, more traditional courses. Several described how nervous they had been at the beginning of the course, but how their confidence and interest had grown to leave them with a very positive feeling. In particular, they described their own receptions of Roman comedy, stressing how surprised they had been to find Roman comedy enjoyable, and how important it had been to them to communicate its humour to a modern audience. They emphasised aspects that had appealed to them in Roman comedy and that they had felt strongly should be incorporated into their production, and also highlighted the elements that seemed foreign and unadaptable to them.

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## **IV. The Play: Storm in a Teacup**

### **The Characters**

The play featured the following characters, all based on Plautine stereotypes, and with names that, as often in Plautus, symbolised their character in some way:

Sa'ar ("Storm") – a young soldier, just finished his basic training, but who is also a master machinator, equivalent to the Plautine crafty slave.

Tom ("Mr. Innocent") – another young soldier, also just finished his basic training, who has become friendly with Sa'ar, and has been sent with him to the base. Tom is the son of the Chief of Staff, but has kept his identity secret so as to succeed in the army without favouritism. He also, to his father's disapproval, longs to study classics at Bar Ilan University. Tom is equivalent to the Plautine young lover.

Yafa (“Beauty”) – the daughter of the base commander, who is living on the base, and is the unwilling object of the master sergeant’s affections. Yafa corresponds to the female beloved of the amator in Plautine comedy.

Shvitzer (“Braggart”) – the master sergeant, the swaggering soldier of Roman comedy. Convinced of his own attractiveness to the opposite sex, and his bravery, Shvitzer constantly brags about his non-existent and impossible military achievements. He is in love with Yafa, who constantly rejects his advances.

The Chief of Staff – father of Tom, arriving today at short notice for a surprise visit and inspection of the base, and playing the role of the stern father (*pater obiurgator*) of Roman comedy.

Ham (“Hot”) – the cook, who has dreams of opening a gourmet restaurant and who must today produce a feast for the visiting Chief of Staff.

### Plot Outline

A metatheatrical prologue, in which the audience is addressed directly by an unnamed character in classical-style dress, opens the performance. She explains that the action of the play takes place on an isolated army base, barely even known except by the handful of soldiers who are posted there, and then introduces the characters one by one. Finally she outlines the key plot element of the arrival of the Chief of Staff, whose identity as Tom’s father is a secret known only to Tom himself at that point. The prologue was based upon the prologues found in two-thirds of extant Plautine plays, and follows the role and techniques of Plautine prologues (Slater 2000:122-6).

The first scene of the play features the arrival of Tom and Sa’ar, and the meeting between Tom and Yafa, who fall in love instantly. There follows a dialogue full of puns and double meanings, in which Tom, in the style of the Plautine lover (e.g. *Cistellaria* 203–28, *Trinummus* 223–75, and *Poenulus* 249-409), his attention focussed on Yafa, hears only the end of Sa’ar’s words to him and applies them to his feelings for Yafa. Sa’ar, in a scene was inspired by *Mostellaria* 161-292, despairs of getting Tom’s attention and directs him to go off with Yafa, saying that he will report to the master sergeant.

At this point, Sa’ar hears the master sergeant, Shvitzer, approaching and directs Tom to hurry off and hide himself; Sa’ar meanwhile conceals himself behind a tree situated in the centre of the stage. Entering, Shvitzer sees Yafa and tries to flirt with her, but she evades him and hurries off after Tom. In an echo of Plautus’ *Pyrgopolynices* (*Miles Gloriosus* 1-116), Shvitzer then muses aloud on his own beauty and fictional military exploits over sixty years of Israeli history, a monologue punctuated by comments to the audience by Sa’ar, who reveals himself as Shvitzer draws to the end of his speech. Informing Shvitzer that he alone has been sent to the base, despite the orders saying that two soldiers would be sent, Sa’ar is assigned a list of chores to help in arranging the base for the arrival of the Chief of Staff later that day, and is sent to assist the cook in preparing the meal. The scene then moves to the kitchen for the first of two comic-chef interludes (*Pseudolus* 804-904, together with Lowe 1985, Gowers 1997:94, and Dohm 1964:142-152), in which Ham, the chef, watched by Sa’ar, delivers a comic monologue about the delicacies he is to prepare, all of which parody army slang.

At the beginning of the next scene, Tom and Yafa are seen, walking and hugging. They are spotted by Shvitzer, who ‘saves’ Yafa, drawing a water pistol on Tom. On discovering that Tom is another new soldier assigned to the base, Shvitzer sends the young lover to the detention cell on the base, where he is shown to be sitting in despair in the next scene. Sa’ar arrives to cheer him up, promising to help, despite his declaration to the audience in an aside that he has no plan in mind at all. He reveals that he has been

put to work because the Chief of Staff is to visit that day. Startled, Tom gasps, 'My father? My father is coming?' but then hastily tries to cover his slip, saying that he had said 'Yafa' not 'Father'. While this scene was not specifically drawn from Roman comedy, Tom's desperate language and exaggerated threats of suicide were based on the Mercator (470-4, 587-600 and 830-41, with Maurice 2003:179-181). Sa'ar's promise to Tom to help him, despite his own lack of a plan at the time, echoes the words of Pseudolus (394-414 and 562-73), Epidicus (81-1003) and Libanus (*Asinaria* 249-265); such behaviour is a feature of the Plautine crafty slave (Duckworth 1994:223-6).

Sa'ar however has put two and two together, and seizes on his new knowledge. Draped in a red cloak, against a background of the colosseum and victory music, he delivers a monologue (described as 'free-style Plautine' in tone) exulting in his own cleverness. In the manner of Plautine slaves such as Pseudolus (*Pseudolus* 574-591) and Chrysalus (*Bacchides* 925-78), he declares that he now has a plan that will enable him to punish Shvitzer, grant happiness to Tom and Yafa, and ensure his own promotion and success in the army ([figure 1](#)).

The scene then reverts to the prison cell, where Tom is dying of his love and threatening to commit suicide if he cannot be reunited at once with Yafa. Sa'ar produces the keys to the cell, describing how he managed to steal them from Shvitzer. He explains that he has persuaded the staff sergeant that Yafa wants to meet with him in secret, and advised him to put on his most impressive uniform for the meeting. This is a uniform with the insignia of the Chief of Staff that Shvitzer keeps as a fancy dress costume. Sa'ar then sends Tom off to the base commander's office, where he is to meet with Yafa, since the base commander, according to him, has left to meet the Chief of Staff, a move inspired by the words of Chrysalus to Mnesilochus and Pistoclus in the *Bacchides* (754-60). The scene ends with his delighted boasting of his own cleverness, reminiscent of Epidicus (*Epidicus* 148-9; 306-9) or Pseudolus (*Pseudolus* 507-52, 562-8).

Shvitzer's room is the setting for the next scene, which was based on *Miles Gloriosus* 1093-1136. Shvitzer is seen getting dressed in his uniform and singing to himself about his own sexiness. Sa'ar watches unseen, laughing, and then reveals himself, to Shvitzer's embarrassment. Sa'ar then sends Shvitzer off to meet Yafa, telling him that she is waiting for him in the base commander's office.

At this point Sa'ar is found by the irate chef, who requires him to help prepare the food, but Sa'ar manages to slip away as the chef practices reciting his menu for the evening. After this comic interlude, the scene changes for the last time to the base commander's office, as Tom and Yafa enter and begin to enjoy a romantic interlude, in which they are interrupted by the entrance of Shvitzer, wearing the uniform of the Chief of Staff. A chase around the room follows, as Shvitzer shouts and abuses Tom, while, with impeccable timing, Sa'ar ushers the Chief of Staff onstage in time to witness this. He intervenes, while Shvitzer blusters, complaining about the terrible new recruits he has been sent, still unaware that he is talking about the son of the chief of staff. When he finally realises the truth, he tries to correct himself, praising Tom effusively, but it is too late. The roots of the final scene can be found in various plays, but the defeat of the soldier in *Miles Gloriosus* (1394-1437) was an obvious inspiration.

At this point, the chief of staff glares at him and the scene then freezes, as the speaker of the prologue enters once again. She explains what happens next: that Tom has earned the respect of his father and been allowed to achieve his dream of studying classics; that Tom and Yafa marry and live happily ever after; that Sa'ar becomes base commander; that Shvitzer is demoted and appointed as assistant and dogsbody to Sa'ar; and finally that Ham completes his military service and opens a gourmet restaurant in Tel Aviv.

At this point, the characters unfreeze and the cook himself runs on, holding covered dishes of food. 'Did I hear my name?' he asks. 'Dinner is served! And the rest of you', he adds, turning to the audience, 'You

can go . . . There's not enough food for all of you? Don't you have classes to go to? Go on, goodbye!

While this final comment parallels the final words of many Plautine comedies, the exposition given by the prologue narrator was not authentic. The students felt uncomfortable however, leaving things open-ended, as Plautus seems to do on occasion, as, for example, with the so-called unresolved romances of the *Epidicus* (Dziatzko 1900, Duckworth 1940:394-6, Fantham 1981:16-17, Lowe 2001:57). My own feeling was that the audience did not actually need things spelled out so clearly, and that the play could have been extended slightly to incorporate the necessary elements of solution. But time constraints in the end impelled the solution that was adopted here.

## Structure of the Play

On the basis of earlier research into Plautine structure (Maurice 2005, 2006, 2007), which demonstrated that many Plautine comedies are clearly and symmetrically constructed, an effort was made to reproduce such a structure while writing the play. Although this was an aim, in practice it evolved quite instinctively, and the initial arrangement of the scenes in the play was almost perfectly symmetrical. The decision was taken to make the jubilant monologue by Sa'ar the central pivot, and once this was agreed, the rest of the scenes fell into place without conscious working of their order; there appeared to be an instinctive need to arrange events in a balancing manner. This structure is outlined in [figure 2](#).

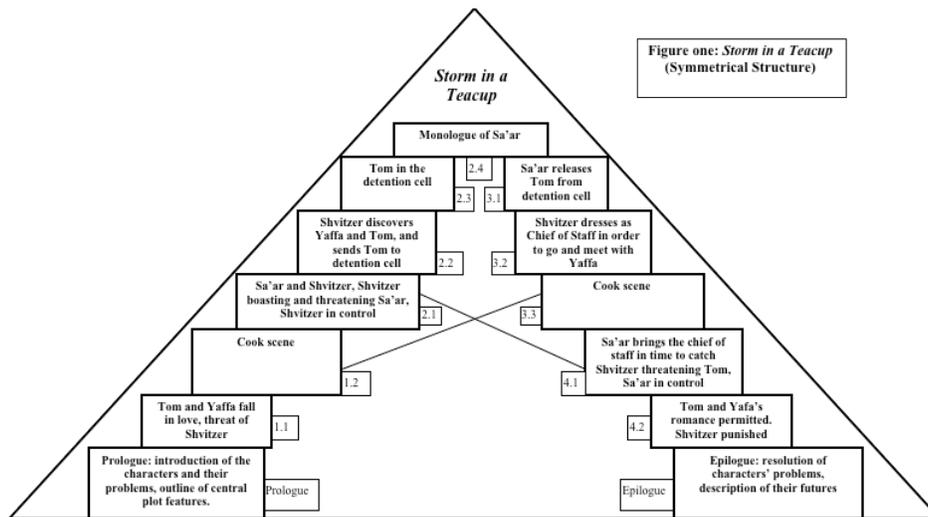


Figure 2: *Storm in a Teacup*—Symmetrical Structure

## Production and Staging

### Casting

Out of the fifteen students registered for the class, only two were male, and one of these two was the only student with any real background in music. In a somewhat ironic reversal of Roman stage conditions, therefore, the decision was taken therefore to have women play all parts. During rehearsal and in pre-production, debates took place as to how far to make a feature of this, and whether it would be possible to incorporate some element of double-meaning or disguise effect into the plot, based upon the fact that the male parts were played by females (Gold 1998). In the end, however, this proved impractical because of lack of time; the only hint that remained in the final production was a metatheatrical comment by the narrator of the prologue that made reference to the fact that these were male soldiers not female, despite appearances.

The fact that there were only fifteen students involved in the project as a whole, of whom a sizeable

number did not want acting roles, meant that there was very little choice regarding the allocation of parts. It was also decided not to use doubling of parts (see Marshall 2006:94-125), both because there was no need to do so, and because of a need to include every student, while at the same time not to overwhelm them. There was no audition process at all, and roles, as well as other areas of responsibility, were allocated by common agreement in class. To a certain extent, this procedure limited directorial control, since a student's willingness to play a part did not necessarily correspond with her suitability for that part.

### *Performance space*

C. W. Marshall has convincingly argued for the fluid nature of the performance space in Republican Rome, and has described his own experiences in producing open-air productions of Roman comedy (Marshall 2006:31-48). While there would have been interesting discoveries to make if our production had been performed outside, it was felt overall that difficulties such as background noise and lack of seating would have placed unreasonable strain on the audience. In contrast to the Roman *ludi*, our performance took place on a regular day in the last week of semester, when those people who were present on campus would not necessarily have been expecting a dramatic performance. There was therefore small chance of an audience gathering to watch a play that they noticed being performed as they walked from place to place. Had there been an opportunity to put on the play at an event such as a festival (e.g. Students' Day, or a Freshers' Fair), the experiment would have had even more value. As things stood, the situation was so far removed from the original Roman experience that it was decided not to attempt an open-air production.

Another factor influencing this decision was the students' lack of experience as actors. An open-air performance requires far greater voice projection, and depending on the size of the performance area, greater exaggeration of movement; in general a less-naturalistic style of acting is required, and none of the actors felt confident enough to attempt this in the time available. The fact that the temperatures at that time of year were an average of 32°C also discouraged the class from any idea of an open-air performance.

As a result, the performance took place inside. Because of a lack of available theatre facilities, the show was performed in an auditorium usually used for conferences and lectures. The room was equipped with a projector, screen and sound system, but with no stage, only two fixed microphones, and very limited lighting. In contrast to the traditional Roman stage, the stage area itself was also relatively small and narrow. Entrances were possible from behind the stage area, through a door which led from the auditorium, or from stage right or left, which involved entering through the back doors of the auditorium and walking down past the seated audience.

### *Stage and Set*

As is well known, the Roman stage usually involved a street scene and utilized a backdrop that represented two or three houses. Actors could enter from stage right and stage left, each of which represented a fixed point (the forum, the port, etc.), or through the doors ostensibly leading into one of the houses. The setting of the play remained constant throughout the performance; while the audience were expected to suspend disbelief and accept that the stage-set was Athens, Ephesus, or some other city, they were not asked to imagine that it would be more than one place during the course of one play (Duckworth 1994:79-88).

It was decided, as the production evolved, to depart from this convention. While the entire play took place at one location (an army base), our production moved from one part within the base to another, with scenes taking place in the cook's tent, the master sergeant's tent, the base commander's office and the detention cell, as well as outside on the base. Because of the limited personnel available and the lack of funds, it was decided to create these backdrops and changes by use of a PowerPoint presentation

projected onto the back wall behind the stage area. This device also enabled other effects, such as a burst of hearts when the love-at-first-sight moment occurred (figure 3), and the embedding of the various motif tunes that accompanied the entrances of the characters.

### *Props*

Props were of course used by Plautus, as they were by almost every other dramatist before and since (Ketterer 1986, Marshall 2006:66-72). Staging the play quickly showed how important they are in creating effect, and how even very minimal props instantly transform the appearance of a scene. Because of financial considerations, our props were both limited and clearly amateurish in style. This aspect was emphasised, however, in order to add a metatheatrical flavour to the production. Thus a tree made out of cardboard was placed on stage at the beginning of the play, and at one point Sa'ar picked it up and held it before him in order to hide behind it. A similar effect was created for the prison scene; a prison door was made out of cardboard, and brought in and held in position by another student. This approach was also used in what turned out to be one of the funniest visual gags: when Shvitzer was dressing in order to go and meet Yafa, a frame that represented a mirror was brought on stage and held in position by two students. As Shvitzer approached the mirror and dressed, another student came on and acted as his reflection. Since this student was a tall male, this created a very funny moment that the audience appreciated (figure 4).

Other props were also limited: Yafa carried a basket of paper flowers, Shvitzer carried a water pistol shaped like an Uzi. The chef's 'kitchen' consisted of a borrowed trolley with kitchen utensils and an array of vegetables. In general, jokes about the limited budget and resultant simplicity of the set were included in the script and contributed to the metatheatrical effect, as indeed they may have done in Plautine comedy (Muecke 1986, Hardy 2005).

### *Costume*

Again, the production's very low budget encouraged improvisation of cheap costumes. The fact that army uniforms could easily be obtained as costumes for almost all the cast was one factor that influenced the choice of play at the very outset. To the basic army fatigues were added individualising touches: the Chief of Staff had, as well as his insignia, a garland on his head that was intended to evoke both the Roman victory laurel wreath and also the feast garland so often sported in Roman comedy. Sa'ar regularly appeared without his army shirt, wearing a white T-shirt instead, and during his "Plautine monologue (freestyle)", wore a red cloak that was thrown around his shoulders as he declaimed in the manner of a successful general. The cook's costume consisted of an apron and hat worn over his army fatigues. The female parts were differentiated from the male by the fact that they wore white Roman-style dresses. These were based on the chiton principle of two rectangular pieces of cloth joined at the



*Figure 3: Love-at-first-sight moment (Galit Dror as Yafa and Moriya Shal as Tom) (photo: Hana Leider)*



*Figure 5: The Prologue (Maya Ben-Nun as the Narrator) (photo: Hana Leider)*

shoulder seams and belted with a cord (Cleland, Davies and Llewellyn-Jones 2007:32-3, Croom 2002, Hope 2003, Sebasta and Bonfante 2001:221-6). The narrator of the prologue wore a tunic dress knotted at one shoulder (*figure 5*), while Yafa's was sewn at both shoulder-seams.

It was striking and somewhat surprising how effective these very limited costumes looked in production, and how much the costumes contributed to the creation of a particular impression or effect. The individual garments and accessories gave an immediate impression of who the character was and what his role was likely to be. It is of course well known that the stock characters of Plautine comedy wore appropriate stock costumes; but just how effective and important these costumes are was made far clearer and apparent in performance. Witnessing the audience's immediate recognition as the comic chef wheeled on his makeshift kitchen was a lesson in how much such theatre draws on physical stereotypes of character, even when that is not apparent from the script.

### **Masks**

Any production of ancient drama must inevitably deal with the thorny question of masks. It seems clear to me that masks were used in the original Plautine productions, and that any attempt to stage a Plautine comedy should involve the use of masks (Wiles 2004; 2004b; Walton 1996:41-57; Marshall 1999; Johnson 1992; Hall 2000; Coldiron 2002). Since we had decided that we were creating a modern comedy in the Plautine style, however, and since we were staging the play under entirely different conditions, it could be argued that the criterion should not be applied. Where masks were an expected element in the Roman theatre experience, and were used to create certain effects, a twenty-first century audience would have very different expectations. Long discussions therefore took place in class concerning whether the performance should be masked, and after extensive debate, the decision was made not to attempt to use masks in our production. This was partly because of the audience's unfamiliarity with masked performance, which we felt would create distance between them and the action of the play. The actors' own inexperience was another motivating factor in this decision, since they did not feel confident that they could successfully learn to perform in masks, especially with such a short rehearsal period. In this instance the gap between Plautus' world and their own seemed very large indeed.

Yet the principle of masking was clearly an important one, and so a compromise was adopted. Inspired by traditional clown make-up, a stylized, exaggerated make-up was adopted, which attempted to give a look similar to that of a mask but without the difficulties involved in performing with a mask. The similarities between a mask and such make-up have been recognised by those involved in the world of clowning:

The wearing of a mask, red nose or make-up has a number of effects on the individual or performer. For a performer, the use of a full or half mask shifts the spectator's focus away from



*Figure 6: Mask make-up of Yafa (Galit Dror) and Tom (Moriya Shal) (photo: Hana Leider)*



*Figure 7: Mask make-up of the Narrator (Maya Ben-Nun) and Yafa (Galit Dror) (photo: Hana Leider)*

facial expression as a clue to what he intends to communicate. This means that the performer has to develop greater levels of physical skill, often in mime, to allow for communication or emotional nuance. Masks depersonalize the wearer; the individual's identity is abnegated, replaced instead by a new and different individual. The mask separates the performer from the spectator and reinforces the spectator's role as observer of a world different from their everyday reality. The mask also frees the performer psychologically, for the behaviour is the behaviour of the mask and not the performer behind it.

Yet there are also differences between such make-up and masks:

In contrast, the red nose focuses the audience's attention on facial expression rather than bodily movement. It also signals the clown's difference from normal people and the brightness of the colour draws the audience's eyes to the clown's face, thus highlighting nuance, which is particularly important in a silent performance. Make-up has a similar impact in that it creates a sense of otherness and the positioning of colour on the face, particularly in combination with a red nose, makes the clown's face fascinating for the audience. (Peacock 2009:15)

Bearing this in mind, we aimed to create make-up that was as masklike as possible, but not with the brightly exaggerated features that would lead to this 'sense of otherness' and create distance between the audience and the performers. An oval white, clearly defined make-up base was therefore employed for all characters. Other features were then added to this base but in a less-exaggerated fashion than in clown make-up. Thus Tom and Yafa both had red but not outsize lips and red hearts painted on their cheeks ([figure 6](#)); Sa'ar was given circular ruddy cheeks; and the cook sported a twirling moustache drawn on in black. The make-up of the person speaking the prologue was entirely white, but she wore no make-up on her eyes and mouth, which created a very mask-like effect as she appeared to be looking and speaking through holes in a white mask ([figure 7](#)).

### **Music**

Since very few of the course participants had any background in music, attempts to introduce anything approaching Plautine *cantica* were, regrettably, abandoned at an early stage. Instead, a motif tune was composed or chosen and adapted for each character, which played whenever he or she came on stage, whilst other tunes provided background to scenes in keeping with the atmosphere of the action (a love scene, a chase, etc.). These musical motifs were played through the sound system, rather than with live instruments, so the modern production differed in this respect as well from Roman comedy. Music therefore played an integral part of the play, but unfortunately not on the scale it undoubtedly played in Plautine comedy (Duckworth 1994:361-4; Moore 1988, 1999). This lack actually confirmed to me just how central music was to Plautine performance, for I felt that although our production in many ways did manage to recreate a Plautine atmosphere, in this aspect it failed to do so, and the whole performance was far more sedate and restrained than a musical version would have been.

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## **V. Observations: The Practice of Play-Making**

As stated above, one of the major aims of this course was to experience how in practice a play develops from an idea, via a text, to a staged production in rehearsal and in performance, and to observe the differences between each of these stages. The presence of noticeable differences between text and performance, which reflects that the text is an intermediate stage rather than a final product, underlines the importance of performance reception as an area of research that is distinct from textual reception. Such differences might also help us to understand better the practical aspects of production and staging of Roman comedy itself, as the modern process of performance illuminates the ancient.

C. W. Marshall has suggested that improvisation is likely to have played a considerable part in Plautine

comedy, meaning that in this semi-literate society, the script may not have existed before performance, and that the play itself was to a certain extent a collaborative effort on the part of the authors, following the basic plot, characters and outline laid down by the playwright (Marshall 2006:260-79). Overall, our experience confirmed many of Marshall's theories, and lent weight to the idea that improvisation was a feature of Plautine comedy.

In the case of our modern play, a product of an 'almost entirely literate' society, we started with a script (which was nevertheless produced collaboratively). It was striking, however, how far that initial text differed from the final performance. Ideas that evolved only in rehearsal were adopted, speeches were refined and altered as the actors experimented with the sound and feel of the text. The importance of blocking the scripts immediately emerged, as the group grappled with the logistics of the plot and the importance of creating a credible sense of space in the audience's eyes. Inconsistencies that were unnoticeable in the text became glaring when on stage, and conversely plot discrepancies that were agonised over on occasion were barely discernible in a staged performance. It became clear in performance that the audience followed the plot by focusing on the general appearance and the actions far more than on the actual words, although snappy dialogue and gags remained of vital importance in sustaining audience interest and enjoyment.

One aspect of this emphasis on the appearance of the stage action was that a large number of physical moves and visual gags emerged as the play (as opposed to the text) began to take shape. These were often the funniest parts of the performance. For example, when rehearsing the scene in which Shvitzer is dressing to go and meet Yaffa, one of the students commented that the actress playing Shvitzer was shorter than Yaffa, but that he must have a different view of his own appearance. From this came the idea of having a mirror frame and a taller male actor, representing Shvitzer's mental picture of himself, mimicking Shvitzer's movements as he dressed to a musical accompaniment; this was in the end one of the most popular moments of the show. It was not an idea that could have emerged however from the script alone. It was only when watching the scene in action that the incongruity and comedic potential emerged. This experience brought home to the students the difference between reading a text and watching a play, and demonstrated just how much modern scholars lack in possessing only written texts of the performances.

The role of the audience also played a part in the improvisational nature of the performance. It was clear that, inexperienced as the actors were, they responded to the presence of the audience by adding unscripted lines or moves, according to expressions they saw on people's faces, or audience laughter. A professional group of actors would surely have reacted even more. Similarly, it is very likely that the play itself would have changed from performance to performance if a series of performances had been held, according to the audience and atmosphere on a particular day, as actors improvised and reacted to these elements (*cf.* Marshall 2006:73-82).

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## VI. Perspectives: The reception of Roman comedy in 21st-century Israel

### Plot and Subject Matter

One of the most enlightening aspects of teaching this course was observing how certain elements of Roman comedy were received by Israeli students of the twenty-first century. As so often with reception studies, appreciation of these elements can lead to a deeper understanding not only of Roman comedy of the second century BCE but also contemporary Israeli society. It also highlights the fact that similar processes must have taken place at every stage of the reception of Plautine comedy throughout history, as different societies responded to the plays according to their own contemporary concerns and interests.

One obvious point was the focus on the *miles gloriosus* as a figure in the modern production. This stock

character was a figure that appealed to the students, who were well able to identify the blustering soldier as stereotype with a great deal of comic potential. Throughout antiquity, war was a normal part of everyday life (Patterson 1993:94). During the Hellenistic period, warfare became the pursuit of full-time professionals. Hellenistic kings needed large forces and supplemented their armies with hired mercenaries and specialists. The professional soldier was such a common figure that by the end of the fourth century he had become a stock character in Athenian New Comedy, where he is depicted as a boastful, hard-drinking philanderer (Trundle 2004:34).

The Roman Republic was a society in which the military was of even more central importance to society than it had been in the Hellenistic kingdoms, and Plautus' plays reflect this importance. In general, the Plautine comedies are shot through with military language and metaphors (Fraenkel 2007:159-165; MacCary 1969), and his audience seems to be preoccupied with war (Harris 1979:43). During the period in which Plautus wrote his plays changes were occurring, as years of seasonal warfare gave place to an ongoing military presence in areas far from Rome (Harris 1979:157-60), but the army played no less pivotal a role than it had done for earlier generations.

Although Plautus took the figure of the braggart soldier from his Greek models, he used this character precisely because it was relevant to his own society, and it is likely that his portrayal of the soldier carried somewhat different connotations for his spectators than Menander's did for a Hellenistic audience. Thus John A. Hanson argues that, although Pyrgopolynices is a Greek figure, Plautus presents him in such a way as to suggest a Roman military leader (Hanson 1965). (On the other hand Leach [1979] sees Pyrgopolynices as different from other blustering Plautine soldiers, and as an enemy soldier, whose defeat and humiliation would have delighted the audience.) As Segal points out, the mockery of the soldier in Roman comedy also reflects his importance in society, for comedy typically makes fun of figures most revered in real life (Segal 1987:124-8).

Israel is also a society in which the military plays a central and important role. The threat of warfare is ever-present, and the citizen army is held in high esteem. Serving in the army acts as a kind of rite of passage and unifying force for young Israelis, and brings with it entitlement to participation in civil society. As one scholar has written,

Army service and the sense of its supreme importance is a common experience. Sephardic and Ashkenazik, secular and modern Orthodox – all experience the same system . . . Everyone who is bodily able goes into the army . . . Israeli leaders over the years understood this well; they knew the army . . . was the key agent of socialization in a largely immigrant and very heterogeneous society. (A. M. Garfinkle 2000:116; Helman 1999:194)

Similarly, the military as a whole, and soldiers in particular, are held in high esteem in Israel. As Garfinkle stresses, 'Being a professional soldier in Israel is a very high-status profession. Being a member of an elite battalion, such as the Golani brigade, is the dream of thousands of boys. Far more Israeli youngsters want to be air force pilots than wealthy businessmen or movie stars or sports heroes' (Garfinkle 2000:110). Because of this high status accorded to the figure of the soldier, which allows him to be mocked by comedy, the boastful soldier was a character who had resonance for the modern Israeli students participating in the class, and this figure quickly became central to the play.

Although the army hierarchy in Israel is characterised by being a flat hierarchy, the military is nevertheless one of the few places in which a formal hierarchy exists and is accepted. In most other areas of society social structures are conditioned by a range of factors such as ethnic background, economic status, education and so on. The divisions between members of social groupings are often fluid and social mobility is common, while hierarchy and formality are rare in most aspects of life from business to education. Republican Rome by contrast, as a hierarchical society in which citizens (and non-citizens)

were divided into different social ranks according to ancestry and wealth, offered very different social conditions. That comedy exploited these social conditions by overturning and breaking social boundaries—for example, by allowing slaves to triumph over senators and young men over their fathers—has been explained in depth over the last twenty years (Segal 1987). The use of the army as the setting for the modern production therefore made somewhat easier the application of Roman comedy, with its reversal of roles, to such a differently structured society.

Modern anthropological research has also highlighted connections between the army and acting. The development of stereotyped roles within the platoon has parallels in the stock characters of Roman comedy. Thus one study talks of the ‘the emergence of “characters” within the battalion’s sub-units (the company clown or the platoon’s “expressive” leader, for example)’ (Ben-Ari 1989:374). There is also a sense that taking on the identity of a soldier is a kind of adoption of a role, for the act of going into uniform for military service (in this case reserve duty) is also described as the putting on of a costume: ‘Many soldiers refer to the wearing of uniforms on the first day of reserve duty as the donning of disguises, as the bearing of masks’ (Ben-Ari 1989:378). Such factors probably subconsciously attracted the students to a military setting for their adaptation of Plautus.

### **Tone of the play**

One rather surprising aspect that emerged throughout the production process was the students’ attitude towards sexuality, in particular sexual innuendo. I was startled to realise that in the liberated noughties, the majority of the group were very uncomfortable with openly using sexual innuendo. They were shocked by their early reading of Terence, whose rape references in the *Eunuchus* and *Adelphoi* appalled them, and they would clearly have been very ill at ease performing Aristophanes. It should be noted that this was not a religious group of students, and all apart from one had served in the army. Whether the attitude of the group as a whole is representative of wider groups, be it the university, or Israeli youth as a whole, can obviously not be argued on such slim evidence; but it was an interesting point to observe nevertheless. It may have been that Plautus (as opposed to Terence and Aristophanes) appealed to them specifically because they did not find his humour and attitude towards sexuality threatening. Roman republican society is often cited as being morally strict; it might be that Israeli society, which is frequently also regarded as conservative, relates more easily to the values of Plautus’ time than to those of other classical periods. It is also possible that the overt sexuality in the Plautine plays studied was so limited that the students were able to interpret them in a way with which they felt at ease; this interpretation may also be greatly removed from the staging of the plays in Republican Rome. If so, it is an interesting reception of Plautus in 21st century Israel.

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## **VII. Results and Conclusions**

The experiment of staging a Plautine-inspired modern comedy was an enlightening experience. It demonstrated that in this reception of Plautus at least, improvisation and fluidity were an integral part of the production process, and physical and visual humour were of paramount importance. To this extent, then, this project supported modern theories concerning Plautine comedy. It was also clear that many aspects of Plautine comedy were as accessible today as they must have been more than two thousand years ago when they were first performed. Much of the humour proved to be both universal and unbounded by time or place. Metatheatrical aspects still appealed, while the strength and flexibility of stock characters was apparent. Some of the themes of Roman comedy also had resonance for this particular group, who particularly identified with the contemporary military stresses and references apparent in the Plautine corpus, and with the lack of overt sexuality apparent in so many other examples of comedy throughout history. On the other hand, some aspects of Plautine comedy were alienating for these students, in particular the use of music and masks. Many of the conditions of staging were also different, particularly with regard to performance space and the abilities and situation of the *grex*. In

order to counter these difficulties, changes were obviously made in this reception of Plautus, although further experiments of this nature could perhaps take these elements more into account. Despite these changes, one thing emerged above all: that the reception of Plautine comedies in performance has interest and fascination for audiences and performers alike in the very different worlds in which they are performed, even in the twenty-first-century society of the modern State of Israel.

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