

When the Romans took over the genteel and sophisticated theatre of the Athenian Menander, they made it their own. They invented the stand-alone joke as we know it; aristocrats would hire a professional comedian called a *scurra* (whence our term *scurrilous*) to tell jokes about class, gender and sex at riotous dinner parties. Accordingly, Roman comedies feature more obvious ‘gags’ and witty one-liners than Greek ones. They are also more rough-and-tumble and obsessed with bodily functions.

The specifically Roman combination of domestic sitcom and fast-paced physical farce, recreated for the 21st century in Phil Porter’s *Vice Versa*, was first dreamed up in the late third century BC by an impresario from the Italian Apennines. His name was Titus Maccius Plautus. The name ‘Maccius’ implies a hereditary family profession, for it was the label for a type of buffoon character, like Mr Punch, in early clown performances. And Plautus’ twenty surviving comedies have had a greater impact on subsequent European laughter of all kinds—in Shakespeare (*The Comedy of Errors* is based on Plautus’ *Menaechmus Brothers*), musical comedy (*A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*) and television series (*Up Pompeii!*)—than those of any other author.

Vice-Versa unapologetically assembles features from different Plautine comedies. The central characters of Dexter, the clever and resourceful slave, and General Braggadacio, the narcissistic soldier who brags about his triumphs in battle and bed, are modelled on the leading roles in *Miles Gloriosus* (*The Boastful Soldier*). From the same play come the idea of rooftop communication between two neighbouring houses and the pet monkey, while the notion of twin Greek prostitutes comes from *The Twin Bacchis Women*. Dressing an old man up as a woman provides the comic climax of *Casina*. But most of the dramatic elements are staples of all Roman comedy, including those by Terence (slightly later and much less ribald than Plautus), to whom *Vice Versa* plays tribute in the monkey’s name. These regular features

include the stock roles of the sponging parasite and the nice but dim-witted young nobleman, the fun with foreign accents, the constant quarrels, misunderstandings and innuendoes.

Plautus, I believe, would have been overjoyed to discover that his comedies were still producing laughter twenty-two centuries after they were first performed, in a land which in his time had not yet even been annexed to the Roman Empire. Since he himself cut-and-pasted the best scenes from Greek comedies, updating and relocating them to contemporary Italian urban contexts, he would have understood Porter's approach: an eclectic synthesis of authentically Plautine constituents *Vice Versa* may be, but it also adds jokes that speak to our 21st-century world, from bananas to grocery vans.

Ancient comedy does three things that ancient tragedy avoids. It routinely breaks the 'fourth wall' between actors and spectators, allowing collusion between them in baiting unsympathetic characters like Braggadacio. It talks about extreme violence, especially the arbitrary flogging to which slaves were really subject, but nobody ever actually suffers any prolonged agony or dies. This allows the audience to enjoy even the most nerve-wracking escapades reassured that everything will turn out alright. But, most importantly, Plautine comedy focusses intensely on eating, drinking, scatology and sex. This reflects Republican Roman culture, in which every house sported phallic symbols at the front door, graphic language was tolerated in the lawcourts and the Senate, a career in prostitution did not necessarily mean exclusion from polite society, and Pompeian citizens commissioned murals portraying such explicit sexual activity that they were locked up in a secret Naples museum when discovered in the late 18th century. Romans were also uninhibited about excretory matters, celebrating the goddess of the toilet, Cloacina, in a shrine built over main public sewer of central Rome. Plautus' own actors wore grotesque costumes which exaggerated their pot bellies, bottoms and sexual characteristics. His corporeal frankness has only become fully acceptable since the 1960s.

Plautus' comedies require exceptional vocal skills from actors—mimicry, punning, verbal crossfire—since they were played in the relatively intimate atmosphere of religious sanctuaries and market squares on temporary wooden stages. The travelling players were low-class, often slaves or recently emancipated; some came from North Africa. The audiences were cross-class, and the operation was a commercial enterprise. If the spectators—slave or free, rich or poor—did not laugh, then the actor-manager responsible would face financial ruin. This helps to explain the curious social world conjured up in this theatre. It is designed to appeal across the social spectrum. Plautus is not political in the sense of Aristophanes, whose satires on ambitious leaders had enthralled democratic Athens two centuries earlier. But they are profoundly political in that the slave characters are so often shown to be cleverer than their masters, morality and immorality is confined to no one status or gender, and, at the centre of the plot, are always the most basic of human experiences shared by all of us. Even though Plautus' plays dramatize a jungle where every individual must mind their own back and pursue their own self-advantage, they also show that humans (like actors on stage) do need to cooperate, however temporary our alliances, in order to survive. As the kindly old neighbour in *Miles Gloriosus*, the equivalent of Porter's Philoproximus, trenchantly puts it, *nemo solus satis sapit*, 'no-one's smart enough on their own.'