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Pseudolus at the Ludimegalenses: Re-Creating Roman Comedy in Context

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Abstract:

This is a post-production report on a student reenactment of the Roman Ludi Megalenses (Megalensia), including a ludus scaenicus, at Illinois Wesleyan University in May 2013. Students studied and re-created some of the rituals commonly associated in antiquity with the worship of the Magna Mater, including a procession of both Phrygian worshippers and Roman citizens and a staged reading of Plautus' Pseudolus in Latin and English. We grappled with questions of text and metatheatricality, theatrical and sacred space, actors, music, movement, costumes (including masks), authenticity, audience reception and occasion. The reenactment allowed us to gain a unique historical perspective by "living history," providing a laboratory for learning about ancient Roman ritual and theater practice.

In my twenty years at Illinois Wesleyan University, I have worked with our School of Theatre Arts, School of Music, and students across disciplines to produce three main-stage productions of Greek plays and a number of workshop performances. In staging college productions of ancient drama as pedagogy, we strive for authenticity with the elements that we deem most important (and possible to recreate), while making the productions accessible to the students and a general audience. Despite the historical and religious importance of the festival context of the performance, however, there are no good models for how to stage an enactment of the rituals of, say, the City Dionysia or the Megalensia. Nevertheless, my experience with intense immersion in the performative aspects of Roman theater at the 2012 NEH Summer Institute on Roman Comedy in Performance in Chapel Hill¹ inspired me to attempt to reenact the Megalensia, including a reading of Plautus' Pseudolus as the ludus scaenicus, with the sixteen students enrolled in my 200-level general education course "Greek & Roman Comedy" during our three-week May Term. Although we had only a short time for research and rehearsal, the learning experience was far more satisfying for all of us than the typical lecture/discussion format. With financial support, collaboration from faculty, students, and administrators, and a good sense of humor, this experiment can be performed on any size campus.²

Roman Festival as Living History: Goals and Limitations

Students find it difficult to understand Roman comedy without the context of the cultural, social and political references of the day. They are often disgusted by the jokes in a Roman comedy and do not think they are funny; they can react even more negatively when they encounter Roman religious rituals that involve blood sacrifice, cross-dressing and phalluses. Students will frequently say, "I'm so glad that we don't believe that," or "In our society we are

more civilized.” Although a deeper understanding of ancient ritual practices does not necessarily lead to acceptance, performance enables students to reflect upon and evaluate the Roman practices in terms of their own consciousness. As Marshall says, “productions are experiments, testing hypotheses about ancient performance, allowing [the director/scholar/teacher] to corroborate and modify conclusions that would otherwise have remained theoretical.”³ Hardwick emphasizes that staging and performing ancient dramas is not only a strand in the transmission of ancient culture, but also a strand in current theatrical practice; productions involve both scholarly and “action” research that facilitate meditation on ourselves and our subjects.⁴ Live performance is a research tool for disciplines beyond theatre, including classical studies and history, and a cross-disciplinary pedagogical tool.

The questions and problems regarding authenticity that arise in staging the Megalensia can be actively engaged and examined through re-creations and performances: for example, “living history”⁵ on the model of, say, the Civil War re-enactor. The benefits of “living history,” or “the simulation of life in another time,”⁶ in this case are especially significant due to the performative nature of ritual and drama. Expounding on Anderson’s definition, Handler and Saxton observe three primary concerns of living-history practitioners: a) authenticity, b) narrative coherence and c) reflexive awareness (being conscious of the work that goes into living history).⁷ There are inevitable limitations to re-creating the past; in our case we do not have complete and reliable descriptions of the rituals and events surrounding the Megalensia in Rome at any particular period. For our recreation, then, we accept and make it clear to the participants and the audience that we are presenting one account, one interpretation of the past, and certainly not the past itself. Indeed, religious rituals entail the subjective experiences of people in the past—their individual and collective feelings, emotions, sensibilities, beliefs—and these are impossible to recover.

Furthermore, participants experience mixed feelings during re-enactment. As Handler and Saxton explain, “on the one hand, re-enactors believe that by producing authentic historical re-creations they are experiencing what others in the past experienced; on the other hand, they speak of their own, personal experiences of moments that seemed real to them.”⁸ This ambiguity is acceptable (even preferable) if we agree with Handler and Saxton that living history is “part of a larger constellation of modern values that urge individuals to fulfill themselves by having experiences they can define as authentic.”⁹ Authenticity in my living history experiment, then, is understood as including our own personal reactions and experiences. Through re-creation of the Megalensia, we experience and engage with the complexities of the intersection of written and performed narratives as part of a whole.

What are the Ludi Megalenses?

Sources vary with regard to the exact nature of the Roman Megalensia and the worship of Cybele, as the cult of the Magna Mater evolved over time.¹⁰ The earliest evidence of a cult of Cybele comes from Asia Minor. The Greeks adopted the goddess at least by the fifth century BCE, if not earlier, and the cult was thoroughly Hellenized by the time the Romans introduced the goddess to Rome circa 205 BCE. Cicero states that the Ludi Megalenses were very pure and sacred (*maxime casti, religiosi*), held to propitiate the goddess and only open to free

Romans.¹¹ Bernstein argues that the nobility brought the Magna Mater to Rome in 204 BCE in order to demonstrate Rome's affiliation to the Greek cultural community and to show Rome's policy of alliances with the Greek East.¹²

Livy (36.36) indicates that the Megalensia in Rome was a six-day festival in early April, instituted at the temple of the Magna Mater on the Palatine from 191/2 BCE. This matches the date indicated by the didaskalia for the performance of Plautus' *Pseudolus* as the theatrical show (*ludus scaenicus*).¹³ The *ludi* were paid for by the state, or else financed by the richest citizens (*optimi viri*), and the plays took place in front of the Magna Mater's temple (*ante templum in ipso Matris Magnae conspectu*, Livy 36.36.).¹⁴ Thus, the re-creation of the second-century BCE festival as the setting for the production of a reading of *Pseudolus* establishes a specific historical context for our performance.

Preparation for the Re-enactment and Performance

In the months before the class began, I secured funding for our project and created a budget¹⁵ that would cover full staging, costuming, mask, props, music and movement. I then began to make contact with colleagues in the School of Theatre Arts and the School of Music and reserved all the spaces required for storage and dressing, performance, and catering for our ritual banquet. I amassed an online research library of primary and secondary sources, including texts, images and recordings, for the students.

Our May Term is three weeks long and students study one subject intensively. Class meets three hours per day, five days a week; we may require at least two more hours of homework per day, for a total of about thirty hours per week. In that short time we covered both Greek and Roman comedy and prepared for the festival re-creation. I established four production teams¹⁶ and asked registered students to fill out a questionnaire to determine the best team for their talents. Each team elected are representative to act as a liaison with me. I appointed a stage manager, a dramaturg, and a videographer.

Collaboration with faculty and students from outside our class was crucial to our success. My colleague Amanda Coles linked her May Term course on Roman religion, "Blood Rites and Mystery Cults," by offering extra credit. Student musicians volunteered to play clarinet, oboe, flute and percussion. Faculty in the School of Music loaned instruments. Associate Professor of Costume Design Marsha McDonald generously loaned costumes and props; the teams made or bought what we could not borrow. Timothy Moore generously loaned masks that had been made for the NEH Institute. The Director of the School of Theatre Arts and professor of Scene Design Curtis Trout took the opportunity to teach students how to prepare and paint large-scale, lightweight muslin backdrops as illusory scenic environments in traditional stage spaces as a class project for his May Term "Scene Painting" course. Using imagery from Roman frescoes and cues from the *Pseudolus*, he designed a backdrop ten feet high by six feet tall by sixteen feet wide depicting an amazingly detailed street in Athens featuring the houses of Callipho, Simo and Ballio, which his students executed in forty-eight hours. The backdrop was of such a scale that our student actors were ensconced in a believable environment specific to the *Pseudolus*.

Can We Sacrifice a Cow?

Having decided to devote one day to staging our festival, the class discussed which of the six days' rituals to include, and how. Even as a hypothetical exercise, the rich discussion that planning for the events generated would have been well worth the time. For instance, students wondered whether they would compromise their own religious beliefs if they built and "worshipped" a cult statue. Most logistically problematic was the animal sacrifice, a central ritual of the worship of the Magna Mater: is it possible to re-enact the sacrifice of a heifer without making a mockery of the event? (One student, whose family farm was nearby, offered to provide a calf for "authenticity;" another student offered to play the role of a heifer. Both literal and representational options were rejected.) Instead, my colleague Amanda Coles volunteered to read a detailed account of the ancient ritual to those assembled.

To aid in discussion of rites and rituals, we watched videos of worshippers from several different cultures performing rituals similar to those that had been included in the Roman worship of Cybele: the bloody sacrifice of animals, self-flagellation (penitent behaviors), cross-dressing worshippers, begging for alms, processions with cult statues, the use of sacred objects and foods, sacred songs and prayers, and the performance of ritual dramas. Ancient South Asian ritual practices and dramas (e.g. Sanskrit drama, regional festival dramas such as the Tamil Aravan and Kuttantavar dramas belonging to the cult of Draupadi), still performed, are not only analogous to Greek and Roman practices on many levels, but they help to illustrate the complex reception of the eastern "exotic" and "foreign" elements of the worship of the Magna Mater in Rome. Catholic and Eastern Orthodox worship of Mary and the Saints also provided fruitful sources of information.¹⁷

During the discussion of these videos, the students reflected on their own religious practices, or lack thereof. They began to realize the level of sensitivity required for our endeavor, and could understand on a deeper level why some people are offended when a satirist parodies or mocks religion. Students were surprised to find out that a number of these rituals are part of their own religion. Careful briefing before and after viewing these videos is necessary, as the content can be disturbing for some students. Finally, to get an idea of how a worshipper might have experienced the Ludi Megalenses, we read a fictionalized account of one celebration of the event.¹⁸

Performance Day Schedule

The re-enactment of the Megalensia took place outdoors on the quad in the morning and the staged reading of Pseudolus in the afternoon, after our ritual banquet. The schedule was as follows:

Morning

- Procession around the quad with the cult statue by Romans and Phrygians;
- Public gathering with speeches in front of the "temple", a.k.a. the chapel;
- Graphic description of the animal sacrifice delivered by a "Roman magistrate;"
- Reading of Catullus 63 in Latin and English by two students;
- Explanation of the ritual objects to the crowd by a "priestess;"
- Galli (eunuch priests of Cybele), played by four male students, beg for alms;

- Short prayers in Latin read from slips of paper (with English translation, so that readers would understand what they were saying).

Afternoon

- Outdoor banquet for all participants, during which the “priestess” read a prayer in Latin to the cult statue of the goddess and fed her moretum;
- Ludus scaenicus: staged reading of Pseudolus in front of the “temple” (chapel), followed by a talk back.

Our Worship of the Magna Mater

To emphasize the perspective of Roman writers who concentrate on the foreignness of the cult of Cybele and the lack of control surrounding it, and the opposition between Roman religious practice and the cult of Magna Mater,¹⁹ we created two groups. Inspired by the fresco from Pompeii that depicts the procession of the Magna Mater,²⁰ the “exotic” Phrygian group of revelers led, followed at a distance by a stately group of Roman citizens. The Phrygian group included four malecross-dressed Galli, the eunuch priests of Cybele, to carry our homemade Magna Mater statue²¹ on a bier and beg for alms, as well as ecstatic dancers, musicians, priestesses and worshippers who carried a black stone “meteorite” to represent the original form of the goddess. A “satyr” performed a sikinnis—a bawdy dance mocking the procession—while playing a pipe. A student “priestess” carried a box containing objects sacred to Cybele: two almonds, a pine sprig, and the black stone “meteorite.” Two music students composed and performed original music for the pompe, inspired by fragments collected in Pöhlmann’s Documents of Ancient Greek Music and CD recordings.²²

The Roman and Phrygian processions with the cult-statue of the Magna Mater circled the quad and gathered for presentations in front of the “temple on the Palatine.” About two dozen spectators, photographers, and a reporter from the local newspaper were present on the quad for the event. There, the Galli begged for alms (we had seeded the audience with coins beforehand). My colleague, in character as the Magistrate, described in careful detail how, “earlier in the day, the praetor Marcus Julius Brutus, a student in costume, had sacrificed a heifer.” Two student “priestesses” then recited Catullus 63 in Latin and English, and I displayed and explained the ritual objects to the crowd. We read prayers to the Magna Mater in Latin, and then joyfully processed to the banquet (a cookout catered by Sodexo Marriott) held on the quad across from the “temple.” We served food that might have been consumed at the ancient Roman banquet: sausages, beef, almonds, dates, fruit, and bread. During the meal I explained the symbolism of the food and performed the ritual feeding of sacred moretum (white cheese mixed with herbs, according to Ovid, Fasti 4.371) to the cult statue.²³

Our Ludus Scaenicus

During the first two weeks of class we studied the comedies in their historical contexts, staging short scene-studies in which students researched a theme or problem in a scene and then performed it for the class, followed by feedback and discussion. I conducted a mask and movement workshop, and we used Richlin’s role-playing exercise to explore audience reception.²⁴ Students conducted research on all aspects of the Megalensia and Plautus’ Pseudolus, focusing on the context of second-century Rome and especially 191 BCE, the year

that the temple to the Magna Mater was dedicated and the *Pseudolus* had its debut. We revised Christenson's translation of the play (Focus 2008), inspired by Walcott's metaphor of "ancient texts and civilizations as 'shards' that enable the archaeology of culture to be explored and to be reworked into new patterns."²⁵ I assigned each student a section of the play to re-write with our particular modern audience in mind, while retaining, to the extent it was possible, the integrity of Plautus' style and intentions.²⁶ Many fraternity members in the class aimed all their jokes toward the Greek system, so we discussed the nature of in-jokes, improvisation, intertextuality, and audience reception.²⁷ Students composed original music for two "tibia" players (clarinet and oboe), who played in reaction to the action and lines of actors during the play and also performed a brief entr'acte. The production team of speaking actors decided that the one theater major in their group, who happens to be female, should play Ballio. Thus we broke the "all male actors" rule; the four student actors doubled or tripled parts, guided by Marshall's explanations.²⁸

As Moore(1998) and others have shown, in his *Pseudolus*, Plautus involves his audience in the action of the play in remarkable ways. Plautus' plays are *palliatae*—"Greek, not Roman settings"—yet the characters in *Pseudolus* challenge Roman family values — *pietas*, *mos maiorum* and *gravitas* —right in front of the Magna Mater's temple. The playwright clearly recognized and accepted his role as part of the larger experience of the worship of the Magna Mater.²⁹ By setting the plays in Greece, Plautus creates a safety zone in which he can, for example, mock seers and divinities, and invite the audience to do the same.³⁰ In our production, the safety zone was the laboratory of the classroom; Many students responded to this "safe space" by venturing beyond their comfort zones. We also used Richlin's role-playing exercise during the performance: we gave the audience members signs to wear with a social label (slave, magistrate, prostitute, matron, etc.), and asked them to watch the performance "in character" and to discuss their reception of the play as that person during the talkback after the performance. The "slaves" were forced to sit in the balcony to represent their marginalized status.

We had planned to hold the *Pseudolus* production on the terrace in front of the "temple;" unfortunately, heavy wind and rain forced us to set up inside on the chapel stage. We placed the statue of the Magna Mater in the front row so she could watch the performance in her honor.³¹ I presented an improvised introduction to the play and explained the main characters. Next, an actor playing Marcus Brutus was supposed to read an account of the dedication of the temple to the Magna Mater adapted from Livy 36.36.4 for 191 BCE; unfortunately, I forgot about him. Time permitted only one run-through and no dress rehearsal, and the actors did not memorize their lines. Thus, the actors did their best they could with scripts in hand, and were encouraged to improvise.³² During one lag, the actor playing Ballio began an impromptu conversation with the audience. She asked, "Any prostitutes out there?" A student wearing the meretrix sign raised her hand. "Well, would you like to come work for me?" "No," the student replied. "I like my leno just fine." (He was sitting next to her and reacted with a laugh.) Ballio then asked, "Anyone out there want to buy a prostitute?" A little boy in the back row raised his hand. This was funny enough, but the fact that the child is the chaplain's son added a further comical dimension for those who knew. Later, an actor running on to the stage tripped over a prop and fell flat on his face. The audience roared, and the actor rolled with it. Thus some

improvisational aspects of Roman comedy were tested and worked well, and students learned the importance of community in audience reception of comedy.

After the performance we held a twenty-minute talkback between the actors and audience members, who asked about the use of music, how it felt to act in mask, the meaning of the backdrop, how the script was updated, and other production-related topics. We then addressed questions to the students who were participating in Richlin's role-playing exercise. They provided a wide range of insights. The barbaroi responded either that they were bored "because they couldn't understand Latin," or they thought it was funny, despite the language barrier, because they could "still get" the slapstick, humorous costumes and the imagery on the backdrop (especially the phallus painted on the brothel door). A girl playing a meretrix responded that she "liked seeing the prostitute go free—it was a dream come true!" The pontifex was "insulted by the vulgarity;" the leno thought that Ballio was "an idiot who deserved what he got;" the ancilla snorted that "in real life Pseudolus would have been tortured and killed;" she did not think the play was at all funny. This exercise helped the audience members to appreciate the disparity of emotional and psychological reactions and engagements that would have certainly been the case with the mixed audience for the Pseudolus in 191 BCE.

Evaluation, Assessment, Conclusions

Assessment included a postmortem on the last day of class, and a production team evaluation on which students were required to rank their own performance and that of each individual team member, giving each a different number.³³ Some students are reluctant to rank, but I emphasize that ranking forces students to evaluate fully each team member's effectiveness and that peer evaluation is a serious responsibility. I have often found that peer review works best when evaluations are done online outside of class time; in private, students are more willing to assess themselves and their fellow classmates honestly. It is important that they know that all assessments are private and anonymous, or else they tend to give everyone the same (usually high) marks.

How closely did our living history experiment parallel ancient practices? The mood was raucous during the events of the day and there was much commotion, with the photographers, videographer, reporters, students in costume and curious spectators milling about. Solemnity only seemed evident during the speeches and reading of Catullus 63; even there, spectators and participants were easily distracted. This parallels the commotion present in some of the videos of the Hindu worship of Draupadi and Bhagvathy, as well as the Penitente worship of the Madonna and Child in Italy, and even some students' own religious practices. One student remarked that she "used to be annoyed by the apparent lack of reverence of the crowd" during the reenactment of the Passion of the Christ during Holy Week. The re-enactment helped her realize that "you don't have to be serious every second during a religious festival" and "humor and commotion actually makes worship memorable and no less meaningful." She also commented that she never really understood the multiple meanings of the Passion play for Christians until she participated in this class project. Thus, this performance was as much or more about the students' own self-discovery as it was about learning how the Romans lived.

I found it fascinating that neither the participants nor the audience commented on or questioned the use of the chapel as a pagan temple during our event or in the talk back

afterward. If anyone was bothered by the presence of the large cross that hung in the chapel over the scenic backdrop of the Athenian street, I never heard about it. I wish that I had remembered to bring this up during our postmortem. My colleague gave this reflection about her students' participation:

This exercise was an excellent cap to our discussions of psychological effects (How shocking that there's a dancing man with a phallus!) and sociological aspects (Free food! But do we have to eat with our classmates? et's bond over how much the cafeteria sucks.) We were just at the end of the "Blood Rites and Mystery Cults in Ancient Rome" course, and my students commented that they didn't really know how the festivals might have felt until they participated in the Megalensia reenactment. Discussions in class don't do justice to the experience, even if one includes thought experiments on the rituals or viewings of other reenactments.

While she herself expressed some frustration at our inability to be historically accurate, we did engage students in active learning by creating a laboratory space in which to explore concepts, issues and problems related to Roman ritual and performance, while embracing the self-reflection that goes along with it. For many students this was the first time they had ever acted in public (not to mention dancing while sporting a phallus and horns). Not only were the students encountering classical texts and culture for the first time, but also theater. The few students who did have theatrical experience helped the rest with makeup, costume, vocal projection and blocking. Research on cross-dressing resulted in increased curiosity and a willingness to try it. A student who played one of the Galli told a reporter for our local paper that he considered himself a "good sport" and thought that the re-enactment was a good opportunity "to learn about another culture that he had not been exposed to."³⁴ I think that everyone involved with this project came away enriched with a deeper appreciation for and understanding of Roman religion, Roman comedy, and themselves.

Changes for Next Time and Other Wisdom

We determined a number of changes for next time: (1) Allow more time, a minimum of four to six weeks, especially if the actors are memorizing their lines. (2) Budget for a professional videographer and photographer; our amateur video and sound quality were subpar. (3) Conduct videotaped interviews with students and faculty as part of the post-mortem record for assessment. (4) If many students contribute edits to the script, the faculty member/director should perform a final unification. (5) Provide release forms for publicity and publication of the event. (6) Present students with a wider variety of theoretical models during research and development, and include more shared reading and discussion of aspects of the project with all cooperating faculty, to the extent this is possible with individual schedules and commitments.

I do not recommend the undertaking of a project like this with a large class unless there are TAs or other faculty willing to help. A good working relationship with colleagues in the fine arts (theatre, dance, music) is essential; those interested in collaborating with these faculty and their students in a smaller way might start by identifying fine arts students in General Education

or survey courses, and asking them which faculty members (or graduate students) might be interested in working together on a project. These kinds of performance projects are not only enjoyable and engaging; they are great public relations for classics both on and beyond campus.

NANCY SULTAN

Illinois Wesleyan University, nsultan@iwu.edu

Notes

¹ The website for the NEH Institute contains many useful resources including bibliography, blogs, external sources, and links to videos: <http://nehsummer2012romancomedy.web.unc.edu/>

² To view the YouTube video of highlights from the event go to: <http://youtube.be/d-rU8qaJKJg>. I have uploaded a Powerpoint overview, handouts and resource materials to my webpage: <http://www.iwu.edu/classics/sultan>. I am happy to communicate with anyone who is interested in trying this with students.

³ Marshall (2006) xi.

⁴ Hardwick (2003) 51–2.

⁵ See Hall and Harrop (2010); Anderson (1984); (1985)

¹⁷ For an overview of comparative studies of Greek drama, see Foley (1999); for a recent example of classroom use of comparative studies of ancient comedy using Japanese Kyogen, see Moore (2002).

¹⁸ www.romanreligion.org, Steven Green's Roman religion wiki. There, he explains and presents a role-playing exercise in which students imagine the experience of participating in Roman festivals as a "worshipper in 10 CE."

¹⁹ See Beard (1996) 161–82; Orlin (2010).

²⁰ Beard, North and Price (1998) 132/33: 5.6a

²¹ Students made the statue using a torso of a female mannequin borrowed from the theatre Property shop, and fashioned her crown out of modeling clay.

²² Music of the Ancient Greeks. Ensemble de Organographia (2011); Musique de la Grece Antique. Atrium Musicae de Madrid (2000); Music from Ancient Rome Vol. 1. Synaulia. Amiat Records (1996).

²⁶ Many fraternity members in the class aimed all their jokes toward the Greek system, so we discussed the nature of in-jokes,

²³ On food and feasting in Pseudolus see Banducci (2011).

²⁴ See Richlin (2013), who assigns various personae to students (e.g., matron, slave, magistrate) and asks them to react to a scene from the point of view of that character.

²⁵ Cited by Hardwick (2010) 194.

²⁶ See Moodie pp. 11–23 in this volume.

²⁷ In addition to the published work on reception of Roman comedy in general and Plautus in particular, I have found Hardwick (2003), Revermann (2008) and Revermann and Wilson (2008) and Miller (1986) most useful for reception studies and the "afterlife" of classic theater.

²⁸ Marshall (2006) 117–118.

²⁹ Moore (1998) 105–7.

³⁰ Tolliver (1952).

³¹ Cicero, De har. resp., 12, 24; 13, 27. See Vermaseren (1977) 125.

³² See Marshall (2006) 245–279 on improvisation in Roman comedy.

³³ See my webpage for a copy of the evaluation instrument: <http://www.iwu.edu/classics/sultan>

³⁴ Sobota (2013).