depended on a dominant emotion or quality like anger or stupidity or appetite for food or sex, and stock types carried the same names in every farce: Pappus the old man; Bucco the boaster; Maccus the buffoon. Scholars have suggested the famous Roman comedian Titus Maccus or Maccius Plautus took his familial (middle) name from this last character. The Romans also had a performance tradition of the *satura*, a mixture of genres and content, the precise nature of which remained a mystery even to ancient scholars. One ancient commentator derived the name *satura* from “satyr,” and described the genre as a musical medley written for the pipes and involving the same kind of shameless dialogue and stage action as Greek satyr plays. The Romans derived their own genre of “satire” from this term, and perhaps from the performative tradition as well. Hence, there were a multitude of dramatic influences for the development of the Roman theater, and these influences shed light on why the Romans may have preferred comedy and “light” musical drama such as mime and pantomime to “heavier” dramatic genres, like tragedy and politically driven satire.

**SOURCES**


**Roman Theaters, Playwrights, and Actors**

**Structure of the Roman Theater.** The Romans did not construct a permanent theater until Pompey sponsored one in 55 B.C.E. Instead, as the Roman architect, engineer, and writer Vitruvius (last half of first century B.C.E.) described, the Romans built temporary wooden structures as performance spaces, and continued to do so even after the advent of permanent theaters. There may have been several political reasons for this. Conservatives argued that theater promoted immoral behavior and fought to prevent the building of permanent structures. As class divisions and personal sponsorship of occasions for performance arose, such as the annual *Ludi Romani* (“Roman Games”), circuses and other spectacles, and funeral celebrations for the wealthy and notable, the building of provisional theater spaces allowed for luxury seating and elaborate decorative elements. There was also a fear of seditious behavior, again due to the growing divide between the aristocracy and the *plebs* or common people, and permanent theaters provided a made-to-order space for public assemblies and mass communication. As needed for festivals and other celebrations, theaters could be erected in public spaces like the Forum, the Campus Martius, or the Circus. These wooden edifices affected the development of the Roman theater as much as the theatrical influences of the Greeks, Etruscans, and early Roman displays and rituals. The ephemeral nature of these wooden theaters allowed the Romans to modify the buildings as needed rather than blindly follow the Greek and Hellenistic models, resulting in a performance space that diverged in distinct ways from its Greek predecessors. Theaters in *Magna Graecia* and on Sicily seem to have followed models from Greece, as might be expected: built into a hillside for ready-made tiered seating, for the most part with a raised stage, an orchestra dividing the acting platform from the spectators, and side entrances. There were also the *phlyax* stages depicted on painted vases—elevated and covered platforms with scenery and accouterments added as needed for individual plays. No remains of the temporary wooden theaters survive, but based on the stage directions implicit in the comedies of Plautus and Terence as well as Pompeian wall paintings and references to the stage in other works, modern scholars can postulate what these Roman performance spaces might have looked like. There was a raised stage with a roofed structure at the rear and usually a public byway running in the front of the stage building. No space for a chorus was necessary. This building could be adapted to suit specific plays, with an altar in front to serve as a temple, or rocks in front of a cave, or a separation between two citizens’ homes. The stage building probably had at least three doors and an off-stage back alley to allow for unseen action and to accommodate the frenetic entrances and exits required in a chaotic comedy. Roman audiences included all strata of society, from aristocrats in special and secluded seats to common folk and slaves. Some playwrights lamented the short attention spans of their spectators, who could easily lose interest in a performance if sidetracked by a high-energy display of physical skill or combat.

**Acting Troupes.** Even though Roman theaters were not permanent until 55 B.C.E. actors were amassed into solid unions and groups by the late third century, something that did not occur until late in the history of Greek theater. In 207 B.C.E., Livius Andronicus—who produced the first plays adapted from Greek originals at the *Ludi Romani* in 240 B.C.E.—oversaw the
establishment of the first performers’ union in Rome, called the Collegium Scribarum Histrionumque, or the Association of Theatrical Authors and Actors. This union was probably modeled closely on the “Artists of Dionysus,” the theatrical association formed in Greece in the third century B.C.E., which was treated as a religious organization exempt from political or military service. This Roman union was associated with the goddess Minerva (Athena in the Greek pantheon), whose temple on the Aventine Hill housed their headquarters. It seems that early on in Roman theatrical history, actors and writers of drama may have had a certain amount of respectability in society that was lost altogether later on. The legal status of actors has been a subject of much debate among scholars. They may have been slaves owned by the company manager, foreigners, freedmen, or even freeborn Romans. At any rate, in the later Republic and Roman Empire, all stage performers, along with gladiators and workers in the sex industry, were deprived of civil rights and designated by the term infamia, which indicated legal disenfranchisement. The Romans may have had a choragus who supported an acting troupe, much like the choregia system in fifth-century B.C.E. Athens (the different spelling comes from the Doric-dialect spoken in the Greek colonies of southern Italy). The magistrates who organized the Roman Games and other opportunities for performance may also have assumed financial responsibilities for some of the dramatic shows held at the annual festival. Many troupes had a dominus gregis or “company manager,” an actor-director who staged the dramas in conjunction with the playwright himself. Lucius Ambivius Turpio acted in and directed many of the Roman comic playwright Terence’s plays in the 160s B.C.E. In the Greek tradition, Roman actors on the formal stage of tragedy and comedy were probably all male, and wore masks and costumes suitable for their roles. The obscene costumes of Old Comedy were long gone, however.

**Famous Roman Actors.** Although the Romans did not hold full-fledged dramatic competitions as in Greece, there is some evidence that individual actors may have participated in contests with prizes. One of the most famous actors in the first century B.C.E. was Quintus Roscius Gallus. Roscius was born to an equestrian family in Latium and was a close friend of Cicero, who de-
fended Roscius in court on a charge of business fraud around 69 B.C.E. It seems that women were allowed to perform in mimes, and various other productions, such as pantomime, private parties, and festivals. Some famous mime actresses are known, like Lycoris, the stage name of Volumnia Cytheris, who was the mistress of some of Rome’s most prominent citizens in the first century B.C.E. Toward the end of the Roman Empire, women were known to perform in revivals of Roman comedy as well as in mimes and other skits, sometimes wearing scandalously scanty clothes. Theodora, a sixth-century C.E. mime actress in the eastern Roman Empire, was described as an especially outrageous and lewd woman by her contemporary Procopius in his Secret History. She was raised by theater folk, became a prostitute early in her life (it was a common conceit that mime actresses were also prostitutes), and was something like a modern-day “performance artist”; she paraded through the streets of Constantinople wearing see-through clothing and allowed birds to eat seeds nestled between her thighs. When she married the emperor Justinian in 525 C.E. and became empress of the Eastern Empire, it caused a terrific scandal.
PLAUTUS AND TERENCE. Even though playwrights often took a backseat to actors and other spectacles that occurred in Roman theaters, two Roman playwrights that were known throughout the Roman Empire were Plautus and Terence. Titus Maccius Plautus, a comic playwright perhaps originally from Umbria, was the first to make Greek New Comedy a truly Roman genre. His career stretched from the late third to the early second centuries B.C.E., but his legacy and popularity lasted much longer. Playwrights after Plautus’ time could ensure the success of a comedy by attaching the name of Plautus to it, and eventually the number of plays attributed to him grew to more than 130 titles. In the first century B.C.E. the Roman scholar Varro limited that number to 21, and most of these still survive. Plautus freely admitted to borrowing titles, plots, and character-types from his Greek New Comedy predecessors, particularly from Diphilus, Philémon, and Menander, but he gleefully modified these plays to suit his Roman audience. Plautus referred to his method of adaptation from Greek originals as *vortere barbare* (“to turn into another language”), but the adverb *barbare* also has the connotation of “barbarically, inelegantly, roughly.” Plautus took the themes of New Comedy—concerns about marriage, family, citizenship, and disputes—and turned them upside down, relying on the influence of Atellan farce and bawdy harvest rituals as much as on his Greek forerunners. Whereas many Greek New Comedies seem to have ended with a marriage, Plautus overwhelmingly preferred to end with a wild debauch, often in the house of a prostitute. Young men, with the help of their cunning slaves, regularly thwarted their mean-spirited parents and ended up not with the proper and respectable young female citizens, but instead with the prostitutes they have been patronizing. Those who had authority in Roman society or those who exploited the weak—such
as fathers, money-lenders, and pimps—were the villains, while the underdogs—those who held little power or social status such as the young man still under his father’s control, the slave, and the prostitute—were empowered and made comic heroes. Plautus frequently employed many themes that can be traced back to Old and Middle Comedy, such as “recognition” dramas, amatory misadventures, and long-lost children. Plautus’ “comedies in Greek dress” could lampoon Roman mores and present a reversal of social structure because they were part of a festival atmosphere, and the fact that they were ostensibly set in Greece (despite the use of purely Roman legal and idiomatic language) helped to dispel any sense of Roman impropriety. Plautus’ brand of comic chaos remained unfailingly popular for hundreds of years. Even Shakespeare used one of Plautus’ comedies of recognition, *The Twin Brothers Named Menaechmus*, as the source for his *Comedy of Errors* and inspired the Broadway musical and film *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. Terence, on the other hand, did not aim for such mass appeal, nor did he receive it. A former slave from Africa, Terence rose socially to enter the elite “Scipionic Circle,” as the friends and clients of Scipio Africanus (c. 185–129 B.C.E.) were called. The Scipio family was fond of Greek culture, and they stood in opposition to conservatives like Cato the Elder, who promoted traditional Roman values and perceived Hellenism as a bad influence. Terence adapted four of his six plays (all of which survive) from Menander, and overtly adhered much more closely to the form and language of his originals than Plautus did. Terence, too, was aiming to please an audience of elite philhellenes and in

---

**SASSY SISTERS**

**INTRODUCTION:** Titus Maccius Plautus was Rome’s favorite comic playwright. He flourished during the late third and early second centuries B.C.E. in Rome, though he may originally have come from Umbria. Plautus freely adapted plots from his Greek New Comedy predecessors for his Roman revels, but since there is very little extant of Greek New Comedy, it is not often that we can compare Plautus’ riotous shows with those of his models. In his play *Two Sisters Named Bacchis*, however, we actually have a significant portion of the Menandrian original, called *Double Dealer*, which allows us to make an educated guess about the changes Plautus may have included in his adaptation. Plautus amplifies the roles of the marginalized—the female prostitutes and the clever slave—and employs the double-plot technique, often seen in Terence, in this madcap play. The comedy is about two sisters, both prostitutes, who are trying to avoid extended service to a pompous soldier, while a clever slave named Chrysalus (“Goldie”) schemes to assist his young master in his relationship with one of the Bacchis sisters while at the same time trying to forestall his old master’s lust for the same girl. In this scene, one of the young men tries to resist the wiles of Bacchis I, but at last gives in to her charms. In this scene we can see something of Plautus’ love of alliteration, puns, and double entendre (many do not translate from Latin).

**Pistoclerus:** I’m more afraid of your allure than of being lured to the bed itself. You are an evil creature. A lurking lair is not appropriate for this young man, woman. … Why am I, a young man, afraid, you ask? To enter into a wrestling arena of this sort, where one sweats into debts? Where I should take up debt instead of a discus, disgrace instead of a race?

**Bacchis I:** You talk beautifully!

**Pistoclerus:** Where I would take up a turtledove instead of a sword [both slang words for penis], and where someone would put a drinking cup in my hand instead of a boxing glove, a ladies’ chamber pot instead of a helmet, a braided wreath instead of military decorations, dice instead of a spear, a soft cloak instead of a breastplate, where I’d be given a bed instead of a horse, and would lie down with a whore instead of a shield? Get away from me, away!

**Bacchis I:** You are much too rough.

**Pistoclerus:** I am to myself.

**Bacchis I:** So make yourself super-soft. … Go on then. By Pollux I don’t care, except for your sake. He [the blowhard soldier] will certainly carry her [Bacchis II] off; you don’t have to be with me, if it’s not what you want.

**Pistoclerus:** Am I nothing at all, then, can’t I control myself?

**Bacchis I:** What is it you’re afraid of?

**Pistoclerus:** It’s nothing, just nonsense. Woman, I put myself in your power. I am yours, command me.

**Bacchis I:** You’re sweet. Now, this is what I want you to do.

that he may have succeeded, but he certainly failed to please the masses as Plautus did. He complains bitterly in some of his prologues that his Roman audiences were frequently distracted by displays of spectacle, such as gladiatorial fights and acrobats. Terence was also criticized for *contaminatio*—combining plot elements and characters from more than one play to create something new. The tensions surrounding Terentian drama reflect the contemporary concerns about the possible infestation of Greek culture and its ability to defile Roman purity during a time when Rome had just vanquished Greece and was inundated with Greek art and culture. Terence’s tendency to celebrate and honor his Greek originals as works of art in their own right made him less admired than his older contemporary Plautus. Nevertheless, Terence’s talent was considerable: his language is fluid and elegant and his philosophical interest in the human condition lends a global appeal to his plays.

**SOURCES**


**OTHER TYPES OF ROMAN THEATER**

**MIME AND PANTOMIME.** Mime was a genre of theatrical performance lying outside the formal boundaries of tragedy and comedy. It originated in Greece, where it probably began as the informal performance of imitative gestures, impressions, dances, and songs. Mimes did not wear masks or shoes, and performed mimetically, as the name of the genre implies, improvising the expression of simple but ribald plots from mythology or daily events through gestures, dance, and facial expressions, accompanied by music. In Greece, mime performers were included in the same class as acrobats, much lower socially than the state-sponsored actors, directors, and producers of tragedy, comedy, and the dithyramb. In Rome, performances of mime were at first connected to the *Floralia*, a raucous and bawdy festival for the goddess Flora, which was established in the late third century B.C.E. Flora was a goddess of blooming plants and was thought to be suspiciously Greek by conservative Roman traditionalists. The *Floralia* was patronized by prostitutes: in fact, *mima* or “mime actress” was a euphemism for a prostitute, and women in mimes often displayed their bodies provocatively. Sulla, the Roman dictator in the early part of the first century B.C.E., elevated the status of mime by socializing with mime performers. Mime eventually became a literary genre in the first century B.C.E., written by such authors as Laberius and Publius Syrus, a former slave who was freed because of his talent in the genre of mime. Historical sources relate that Julius Caesar asked Publius Syrus to compete in the Roman Games of 46 B.C.E., and he challenged his fellow producers of mime to a contest of improvisation, of which Caesar declared him the winner. Roman mime was known for its inclusion of proverbial expressions and pithy moral teachings (despite its reputation for indecency), which were excerpted and collected by Seneca the Elder, among others. This genre reached its peak of popularity in the last years of the Roman Republic, but continued to be enjoyed throughout the remainder of the Roman Empire. A connected genre, “pantomime,” meaning “one who mimes everything,” became popular in the Roman Empire. It was brought to Rome from the Hellenistic east in 22 B.C.E. by the actors Pylades, who was said to have a more dramatic tragic style, and Bathylus, who preferred comic themes. A single, silent performer who wore a mask and loose clothing to permit free movement, accompanied by mu-