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## ROMAN THEATRE AND ITS INTERCULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Alexandra IORGULESCU <sup>1</sup>  
Mihaela MARCU <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup> Associate Professor, University of Craiova, Romania

### Abstract

A model of universal dramaturgy, the Roman theatre goes beyond time and reaches the contemporary, always proving its intercultural values. This is one of the arguments on which we will base our approach. Because there are amazing intercultural connections between antiquity and modernity. One of these connections is achieved through Roman theatre.

*Keywords: interculturality, dramaturgy, universal values*

### 1. SHORT OVERVIEW OF THE ORIGINS OF ROMAN THEATRE

We find instructive references about the beginnings of the Roman theatre in Titus Livius, many of them referring to the *Fescennine songs*, named after the Etruscan town of Fescennium, where they were modelled. These Fescennine jokes and "mixed" productions (*saturnae*), mimed and sung on different rhythms, were combined with the scenic dances of the Etruscans, often having a rudimentary and shapeless versification. The licentious part of these songs had a satirical content, similar to the spirit of parody common in Greater Greece in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. When Romans had arrived on Greek territory, they were familiar with sumptuous stagings and all kinds of tragic, comic or parodistic plot plays. The public had become eager for novelty, so public and private plays became more frequent, both in times of crisis, to win the goodwill of the gods, and in times of prosperity, to please the gods.

The language acquires a more literary quality, and the unfolding of the "subject" becomes more regulated, thanks to the mission of the Hellenizing poets who separate tragedy from comedy.

For years, *Ludi Romani* were organised in honour of Jupiter (4-19 September) by the aediles curules, while from 4 November to 17 November the aediles plebis were in charge of the *Ludi plebei*. Starting from 212 the *Ludi Apollinares* (6-13 July) were organised by the urban praetor; since 191 the *Ludi Megalenses* (4-10 April) were organised also by the aediles curules, in honour of the goddess Cybela. To gain the people's trust, wealthy magistrates or patricians missed no opportunity to perform a religious act by organizing extraordinary games: votive, dedicatory, triumphant or funeral plays. These included gladiatorial fights and theatrical performances, as well as various types of performance.

### 2. THE ORGANISATION OF THEATRE PERFORMANCES IN ANCIENT ROME AND THEIR INTERCULTURAL ASPECTS

The organisation of theatrical spectacles was the responsibility of a special clerk, who dealt with the impresarios of acting troupes. Here we recognise elements which are also to be found in the performances of modern universal theatre. Until the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, the legal status of actors was deplorable, and their reputation was on a par with that of prostitutes. But from just after this date onwards, the social position of the actor gradually improved with the enormous popularity theatre gained.

Besides the actors, each troupe had a flute player (*tibicen*) and extras (*operarii*). At the beginning, the actors were paid modestly, the director paying them according to their quality and role. Later, they joined companies that toured on established itineraries. They also began to be awarded substantial rewards (gold or silver crowns, money, expensive clothes) and in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AC they even had statues erected in several cities. The

remuneration of actors was often exaggerated, which is why it was decided to set a limit. In addition to the actual payment, the actors received gratifications (*corollaria, donationes*) from the donor of the performances according to their performance.

Women's performance in the theatre was extremely limited: they were only allowed on stage as *mimes*, i.e. in those comic, often vulgar and licentious moments, inspired by everyday life.

Over time, the actors formed themselves into colleges, one such guild, the *Corpus scaenicorum latinorum*, dating back to the time of the Empire, as some inscriptions show.

The prologues to Plautus' plays (*Poenulus* and *Amphitruo*) give us precise information about the organisation of contests between the actors of the different troupes, the prize being either a palm branch, *palma*, or money. The prize was awarded by the president of the festivities depending on the impression the artists made on the audience (Plautus, Terence, *Latin Drama*, p. 39).

The tragedies and comedies, borrowed from Greek, are performed in Greek costumes: they are called *palliatae*, because the actors are dressed in *pallium* rather than the traditional toga. Thus, the plebeian taste for the spicy sides of Greek exoticism is stimulated, while the dignity of the Roman aristocracy is safeguarded. This aspect was preserved in paintings, mosaics and stone bas-reliefs depicting theatrical scenes. The miniatures on some manuscripts and the stories of the authors also bear witness to the documents that provide us with information about Roman theatrical performances.

Following this period of beginning, of searching and testing, one would have expected an autonomous dramatic creation to emerge. However, this only happened to a minimal extent, as foreign influence - particularly Greek - proved to be stronger. There are also a few Roman tragedies, *praetextae* (the toga praetexta is the red-trimmed toga of the magistrates), from Naevius' time, which turn out to be plays of circumstance, with patriotic purpose or intended to serve the interests of a prominent family.

Inspired by Greek models, the novel adaptations also bring significant changes. For example, the limitation to a maximum of three actors is no longer respected, each role has its own interpreter. The chorus almost completely disappears, and the orchestra is therefore assigned the places of honour. In order to make room for the intense movement, pomp and amplitude of the procession of extras, the stage is considerably extended (33 meters wide, 6 meters deep, 15 meters high - 1 meter from the ground).

Thus, Roman theatre has Greek representations as its substratum, but it will begin to become original. And so, many constitutive elements of Roman plays, their staging, the acting of the actors, their remuneration, the use of masks will include art forms that become aspects of interculturality. This assertion is based on a simple analysis of universal dramaturgy, which over the centuries up to the present day will draw its inspiration from the models of Greco-Roman antiquity.

#### 4. CHARACTERISTICS OF ROMAN THEATRE VERSUS GREEK THEATRE

Roman theatre, unlike Greek theatre, never had a religious-ritual character. The curtain was raised after an announcer announced the title and subject of the play. There followed a second, internal curtain, maneuvered to cover certain parts of the stage in turn. Until the 1st century AD, plays were not divided into acts, but were interrupted at intervals by short pauses, with the chorus (in tragedies) or a flautist (in comedies) singing in the background. The action was not interrupted but enjoyed continuity, "as happens today with a medium-length movie that keeps the audience's interest aroused until the last word: *plaudite*" (Bayet, *Latin Literature*, p.56).

In Rome, the role of the chorus is less important, gradually diminishing. Returning to the actors' costumes, we note their variety, influenced by the nature of the play. The title *fabula palliata* given to the comedy derives from the name *pallium* (Greek for 'cloak'), the actor wearing Greek clothing.

In the *praetexta* tragedy, the Roman costume was worn by the high-ranking characters, who displayed on stage the toga with the purple band (*toga praetexta*), which also gave the name of the play, *fabula praetexta*. There was also a period, more precisely towards the end of the Republic, when the stage costume was woven with gold thread, an exaggeration common among actors who performed under the patronage of the Aedile M. Aemilius Scaurus.

After the word *crepida* (high-soled shoes), *crepidata* is another name given to the tragedy.

In the *Palliata* comedies, the actors kept the Greek costume whose colour changed according to the age of the characters, their moods and social rank. Thus, the young wore multi-coloured outfits, the old - white clothes in contrast to the slaves dressed in short clothes; the happy characters also wore white, while the poor paraded in red. The young women were dressed in foreign fashions, the courtesans wore the colour yellow - a sign of greed, and *Prologus*, in a different costume, held a branch in his hand.

The white toga was the specific costume of the *togata* (Roman) comedy, also known as *tabernaria* (*fabula*), after the place where the action took place: the grocers' and barbers' shops, the so-called *tabernae*.

Unlike the Greeks, Roman actors adopted the *persona* mask late, as it was a privilege of the young Roman nobles who acted in the *atellan*. They were officially forbidden to wear the mask in order not to be mistaken for *histriones* (Livius Titulus, *Ab urbe condita*, p.15). To emphasize their features, they wore make-up, like modern actors, and wigs of different colours on their heads; the interpreters of the female characters whitened their faces and arms with chalk.

The plays of Plautus and Terence were also performed without masks. Later reintroduced by Roscius, its use was received with reluctance by audiences eager to see the expressiveness of the figure on stage.

In the development of the theatrical act, gestures are constantly evolving. Emphasizing their role in drama, Quintilian says: "They must illustrate the actor's thoughts and feelings" (Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, XI, 3, 73).

The Romans' attitude towards the acting profession differed from one period to another. Considered degrading because it was paid, according to the jurisconsult Antistius Labeo, a contemporary of Cicero, this profession should be done for pleasure. Roscius, who renounces remuneration when he becomes a Roman knight, is also influenced by this thinking.

Later, in Caesar's time, things changed radically and nobles were allowed to play.

All Roman citizens were allowed in the theatre, even slaves were tolerated, but not foreigners. Seats in the audience were allocated according to the social category of the spectators: the seats in the orchestra were reserved for senators, followed by knights on the first 14 steps of the *cavea*; the middle of the theatre was reserved for commoners, while the plebeians had the last steps; women were also seated here. The children of the senators had special reservations, along with teachers, priests and magistrates.

The audience was unpredictable, sometimes noisy, sometimes whistling, sometimes even leaving the theatre. These brawls were often organised, generated by rivalry between the directors of the companies, which required constant control by the guards (*conquisitores*).

Among the Romans, the first theatrical performances were staged on simple stages made of beams and planks, which were dismantled at the end of the show. The plays of Plautus and Terence were also performed on such improvised stages. The Romans called the *cavea* an amphitheatre-like space for the audience.

Attempts to build a stable theatre were doomed to failure, as the attempts of the censors Valerius Messalla and Cassius Longinus in 154 were unconvincing. This was made possible thanks to Pompey, and in 55 BC the first stone theatre was built on the Field of Mars, based on the Greek one at Mytilene. The ruins of this theatre, which held an impressive audience of some 40,000 spectators, are still preserved today.

Several key features distinguish Roman and Greek theatre. One of these includes the size of the stage (*pulpitum*), which is much larger in Roman. The hall and stage form a complete circle, with the first 14 steps of the amphitheatre belonging to the knights, by the *lex Roscia* of 67. The Roman theatre stands out for its specific architecture, built on flat ground, with an amphitheatre-shaped hall and steps supported by vaulted galleries.

The interior of the theatre, the stage and even the exterior walls were decorated with multiple ornaments: gates, friezes with statues, colonnades, perspective games.

Begun by Caesar and finished by Octavian Augustus, Rome's second theatre, with its 20,000 seats near the Capitol, has been well preserved to the present day. So has the one in Orange, southern France, which is still in use today.

Little is known about how the curtains worked. There were two of them: a large curtain, the *aulaeum*, which was lowered at the beginning of the performance and raised at the end, and a small curtain, the *siparium*, behind the other.

Truly monumental edifices, the theatres reflected the tastes of the Romans, who loved pomp and grandeur in everything they built.

## CONCLUSIONS

Among mankind's many forms of artistic expression, the theatre is complex, full of meanings and elements that transcend the barriers of time and become relevant in any society. Seen from this perspective, the ancient Greek and Roman theatre carries elements of interculturality, which can easily be seen in universal drama. A strong connection is thus created between ancient and contemporary art.

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