

Pseudolus at the IWU Ludi Megalenses:
Re-creating Roman Comedy in Context

The Games of the XXII Winter Olympiad have ended, and we are already missing the thrill of the victory and the agony of defeat. We all enjoy the pomp, the spectacle, the total package of entertainment that only public *ludi* can provide. In this paper I describe and report on the results of a university course project to re-create the *Ludi Megalenses* with a *ludus scaenicus* during a three-week May Term in 2013. Students in my "Greek and Roman Comedy" course studied and reenacted some of the known rituals 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. I chose *Pseudolus* not only because it is one of Plautus' best and most produced, but also because the premier performance of this play is dated with certainty to the dedication of the temple to the Magna Mater on the Palatine in April 191 BCE. "Living history" reenactment and performance provides a laboratory for learning about ancient ritual and theatre practice, allowing students to gain essential cultural and historical perspectives and empowers them to assess critically their own value systems.

The festival re-creation and staged reading involved many people. Students in my course worked in production teams to research all aspects of the Ludi Megalenses and the Ludus Scaenicus. We conducted a comparative study of ritual dramas in living cultures. Students composed and performed original music and movement, revised the script of *Pseudolus*, provided or made costumes, makeup, and props. The event also involved the efforts of faculty in other departments, catering, students beyond the class, and staff. We also used the role-playing exercise created by Amy Richlin (CJ 108.3).

The re-creation of the Megalensia as a setting for the production of a reading of *Pseudolus* establishes an historical and religious context often lost in modern performance of Roman comedy, and certainly lost in courses where students only read and discuss the scripts in translation. The benefits are especially significant due to the performative nature of the genre of ritual and drama. Performance of the Roman plays in context provides a learning space where participants can grapple with the uncomfortable subjects (e.g., ritual castration, animal sacrifice, rape, torture of slaves, and prostitution).

Not everything we tried worked, but overall, the experience was a success. Students stretched themselves beyond their comfort zones and came away with a much deeper appreciation for and understanding of Roman culture, ideas, and values. Perhaps even more importantly, we all learned more about our own cultural practices. Furthermore, the event attracted the attention of the media, prospective students, faculty, staff, and the president of the university. Thus, it served as a positive force not only for learning, but also for public relations. I hope that this post-production report will provide useful information for faculty who are interested in "living history" projects with ancient drama at the high school or university levels. Although these productions involve an enormous amount of organization, cooperation, and planning, the outcome is truly worth it.

Work Cited:

Richlin, Amy. 2013. "Role-Playing in Roman Civilization and Roman Comedy Courses: How to Imagine a Complex Society." *CJ* 108.3, 347-61.

Audio-Visual Need: Projection/Sound for PowerPoint with audio/video files.