“Something for Everyone, A Comedy Tonight!”:

Translation and Performance in the Second-Year High School Latin Classroom

Even bored, sultry sophomores can’t help themselves from laughing while watching the film *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1966). The engagement is almost immediate, and once engaged, they begin to clamor for the opportunity to produce a play themselves. But most second-year Latin students are unable to write even a short play that either their teacher or their cohorts can understand. So we must all be grateful for G.M. Lyne’s libellum, *Personae Comicae*, consisting of eight short Latin skits based on Plautus’ comedies. Each skit features some of the stock characters found in Roman comedies. These are the same characters found in the film *A Funny* *Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, namely, the tricky slave, the braggart soldier, the foolish old man, the domineering wife, and the lovesick young man.

In this presentation I will demonstrate how Lyne’s short skits can be used in a second-year high school Latin class in conjunction with the film *A Funny Thing* *Happened on the Way to the Forum*, and informed by Monica Cyrino’s book, *Big Screen Rome* (2005). Each group of student players must translate one of Lyne’s plays. They also must create a stage set, costumes and prepare props. The students have their scripts fromLyne, but they must look to the film *A Funny Thing…* and to Cyrino’s chapter on this film for ideas about staging. For example, Cyrino states that, “most stages represented a city street, with a stage building painted with two or three house-fronts serving as a backdrop, and actors could enter through these doorways or from the projecting wings on either side of the stage” (2005: 164). Fortunately this is not a difficult backdrop to create even in a classroom. Concerning costumes, Cyrino states, “Costumes helped distinguish the various stock characters in the comedy, like the wily slave or the greedy pimp; long tunics distinguished free citizens, while short ones marked out slaves, soldiers, and sometimes young men. Colors also classified different characters: red for slaves, white for virgins, yellow for prostitutes (because gold is the color of money)” (2005: 164). Once students are looking for ideas about sets, costumes, and props, a review of some scenes from the film provides an abundance of images, everything from the Domina’s horrifying make-up to the ingredients for love potions in the kitchen.

Following the Latin production of a play, the cast must perform either an English translation of the same play, or an English adaptation of it by recreating the basic themes of the play into a modern sitcom setting and by transforming the stock characters into those dressed in modern garb. These plays can then be performed for the Latin class, parents, and/or the general student body. This presentation will offer an overview of both the challenges and successes of this dramatic performance project in the second-year high school Latin classroom.

Works Cited

Lyne, G.M. (1992) *Personae Comicae.* Wauconda, Il: Bolchazy-Carducci

Cyrino, Monica Silveira (2005) *Big Screen Rome*. Oxford: Blackwell Press

*A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the* *Forum.* MGM (1966).