

Teaching a *not-G-rated*, all-Greek *Lysistrata* in the Midwest

This talk introduces CAMWS members to a lively film adaptation of this widely taught play and explains why it is (believe it or not) reasonably accessible to Midwestern college-age audiences and what it can help teach. The talk includes several short clips.

I have taught Giorgos Zervoulakos' *Lysistrata* (1972) for thirteen years to approximately 300 students, ranging from a cassock-clad Benedictine monk to acting majors who later staged an 'adult' *Lysistrata* of their own. Most were not humanities majors and few spoke any Greek, yet all found something of value in the film and many expressed surprise at how entertaining it proved. Bikinis, one student informed me, translate well across cultures.

There is no mystery to the film's appeal. It was produced to be a crowd-pleaser: a boisterous musical with slapstick, sight gags, singing and dancing. It won the "best production" award at the 13th Thessaloniki International Film Festival and was the second highest grossing film in Greece that year (Van Steen 2000,). The cast were veterans of stage and film, at the height of their careers. I often pair clips from it and *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (Lester, 1964), which it resembles in a number of ways, in order to contrast Old vs. New Comedy. Subtitles notwithstanding, it's easy to watch.

One often looks to stagings of ancient scripts as a way to teach issues of performance. The film is adapted closely enough that it reinforces the play but it does not try for an "authentic" recreation of an ancient staging. There no masks, ancient costumes, or *phalloi*, and it is filmed on and around the Acropolis. This can still facilitate a historically contextualized appreciation of the play: the location helps students visualize the monuments and gives them an intuitive sense of why the Parthenon is such an iconic image. Students who agree with the decision to shoot on location (and the topic elicits great discussions) often feel that it communicates a sense of

authenticity, unlike, for example, the sets in Bellmunt's *Lisistrata* (2002) or Thomas' recent *Lisistrata* (2013).

Films are also a way to teach students to read modern adaptations as commentaries on ancient texts and this is where I have found Zervoulakos' *Lisistrata* most useful. It opens up conversations about divergences between the ancient and modern cultural context, the most interesting of which have involved gender roles and politics. It is not easy to pronounce on the film's feminism. 21st century students, in particular, are sufficiently distanced from the original production context to recognize the limitations of the rights, authority and power the film claims for women. It forces the issue of contemporary relevance (again, the bikinis). One effective discussion prompt has been the question of its suitability as a commemoration of International Women's Day (it was broadcast on Greek television on March 8, 1986). This talk will survey some of the more provocative points to be made on both sides of this question, with illustrative clips.

Militarism is visually prominent in the film. *Lisistrata* herself is costumed as a heroine of the Greek War of Independence and the actress playing the role had just played another of these heroines in a film released the year before. *Lisistrata* was made in defiance of a military regime (1967-74) that imposed strict censorship on cultural productions that did not meet its moral standards. The film flouted these in many ways, the most obvious, to American students, being the adoption of the visual language of late 60's hippie culture – long hair, miniskirts, peace signs (Van Steen 2001). Indeed, the film is preoccupied with the U.S. to a degree that American students find fascinating: characters wave American flags and sing to the tune of the Marines' Hymn. Yet familiar tropes of anti-war protest are defamiliarized – performed by Greek actors, in a Greek play, in front of Greek monuments. The film stimulates students' curiosity about

perceptions of the US abroad and, more generally, about the original play as an instrument of protest – of which there are more recent examples than 1972 to discuss. Again, the conversations, which I will summarize briefly, have been stimulating.

On a practical note, the film is legally available primarily through libraries (although there is a current distributor based in Athens). It is unrated but contains nudity and a final scene that might best be described as a tastefully shot orgy in a vineyard (no, I wasn't planning to show this bit). I have given trigger warnings at screenings (yes, especially for the monk) but found that the sex, which happens to be consensual, marital, and straight, has raised minimal concerns from the students I have taught (in marked contrast to the rapes of New Comedy).