

Two-a-day: American Vaudeville and Greek Old Comedy

Between 1880 and 1930, the American Vaudeville review—a combination of wildly diverse acts ranging from acrobats, to song numbers, to animal tricks, to stand-up comedy and even scenes from Shakespeare—was the most popular form of entertainment in the nation. During the heyday of Vaudeville, it is estimated that some 25,000 performers made a living performing in these sorts of shows and touring an established circuit of venues that ranged from the famed Bijou and Palace theaters in Boston and New York City to local halls in small towns across the country (Garner and Palmer, 1997). A typical Vaudeville show was a seemingly chaotic pastiche of acts that displayed not only a variety of forms, but also a variety of content from “polite entertainment” (acts deemed inoffensive to both men and women) to acts based on ethnic humor, aggressive physical comedy, and sexual provocation (Trav, 2005). Although such a diversity of performances on a “bill” might seem like an *ad hoc* arrangement—and indeed some individual acts may seem as if they themselves were “ad lib”—this combination of numbers was a carefully planned rotation designed to keep spectators engaged, entertained, and in their seats (Cullen, Hackman, McNeilly, 2007). In addition, many of these acts were carefully scripted to include not only the simulation of improvisation, but also to include a high level of interaction with the audience with the goal, as per producer Benjamin Franklin Keith, of keeping the seats full for the “two-a-day” (i.e. the daily shows; Garner and Palmer, 1997).

Given this combination of high-brow and low-brow humor, and the shifting styles of on-stage action, American Vaudeville provides a useful counterpoint to understanding and appreciating certain aspects of Greek Old Comedy that are often difficult for modern

students to envision: specifically, the plays as a scripted variety of genres (e.g. choral lyric, agonistic debate, slapstick physical humor, scatological humor, iambic poetry) and the presentational style of acting which emphasizes audience interaction. Modern audiences are accustomed to a representational style of acting in which the actors and action largely ignore the presence of the audience, placing the emphasis instead on the relationship between the characters in their world on the stage. In contrast, Greek Old Comedy—like American Vaudeville—relies on a presentational style of acting in which the actors “break the fourth wall” not only by acknowledging the presence of the audience, but also by involving them directly in the action on the stage. This level of metatheatricality and engaged spectatorship is something that few theater-goers experience, and such an experience is especially rare among students, many of whom had their the first encounter with live theater accompanied by stern directives to be silent and sit quietly during the performance. In terms of encouraging the students to expand their understanding of how Greek Old Comedy “worked” in the theater, presenting American Vaudeville as a cognate model illuminates the particulars of audience-engaged performance and helps the students to understand the energy and appeal of Aristophanes’ comedies on the stage, as well as on the page.

This presentation will focus on discussing the parallels between Greek Old Comedy and American Vaudeville in terms of genre, specifically the competitive nature of the performances (i.e. various Vaudeville producers competing for theatrical space and acts competing for inclusion on the “bills”; Aristophanes and his fellow comic writers competing for inclusion in the dramatic festivals and for accolades once accepted), and their ubiquity within their respective societies (i.e. Vaudeville theater and Athenian

dramatic festivals were viewed by an overwhelming majority of citizens). In terms of using American Vaudeville to illuminate the nature of the performance of Greek Old Comedy, this presentation will feature select digital clips of Vaudeville acts, along with various stills and playbills, set in comparison to similar scenes in Aristophanes' comedies, as well as various 5th/4th century vase paintings depicting scenes from comic performance. Encouraging students—and all those who work with ancient performance—to familiarize themselves with an American genre of theater that is such a close parallel to Greek Old Comedy, and is one that they can still see performed in its original context, permits us to delve more deeply into issues concerning the role of theater within a society, the fundamentals of comedy, and the nature of spectatorship.