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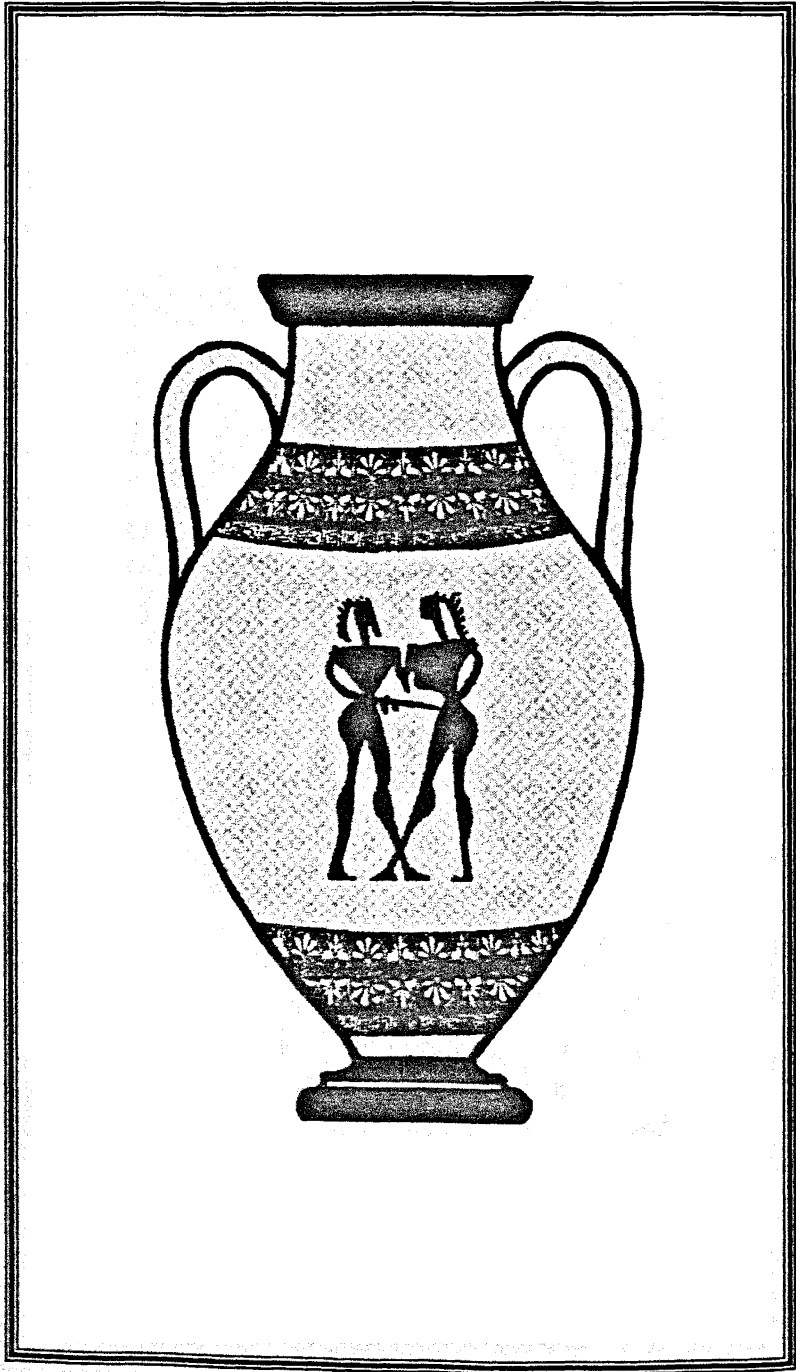


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# **“Tweaked Roman” in *The Menaechmus Twins* by Plautus**

**by William Grange**

Why do a production of *The Menaechmus Twins* by Plautus at Marquette University in Milwaukee? Most people think of Milwaukee as the city of Laverne and Shirley, where a large percentage of the population is employed in one of numerous breweries, and citizens spend their non-working hours in bowling alleys or at fish fries. True, Milwaukee boasts more bowling alleys per capita than any other city in the country, but Milwaukee has more Equity theatres than breweries, one of which is an outstanding LORT A repertory theatre with an international reputation. The University itself features a major in classics, and offers a full complement of upper division courses in Cicero, Livy, Vergil, Horace, Roman philosophy, Roman art, and even a course in Roman comedy. The University also has classical scholars in its administrative ranks, among them Vice-president for Academic Affairs Francis M. Lazarus, author of a dissertation at Cornell University on classical anthropology and philology. Lazarus described Plautus (250-183 B.C.) as “the greatest comic playwright Rome ever produced” in an essay for the production

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program, and he, along with faculty members throughout the University strongly advocated presentations of “classical” drama on campus in the Evan P. and Marion Helfaer Theatre.

The English Department was especially interested in doing the play, perhaps because of its influence on subsequent European dramatic creation, beginning in Italy. Adaptations of the play in Italian include Trissino’s *I Simillini* (1547) and Goldoni’s *I Due Gamelli Veneziani* (1747); in France, Rotrou’s *Les Sosies* (1636) and Regnard’s *Les Menechmes* (1705) trace their lineage to Plautus. The most well known adaptation, of course, is Shakespeare’s *The Comedy of Errors* (1594), even though it appends the complication of an additional twin Dromio (slave to Antipholus of Ephesus, Shakespeare’s replica of Menaechmus of Epidamnum). *The Menaechmus Twins*, as progenitor to Shakespeare and the others, is a literary curiosity, yet Plautus’s “skillful use of language, clever dialogue, love of slapstick and buffoonery, and his ability to depict stock characters as credible individuals,” Lazarus noted, “make the play one of the ancient world’s best.” As such, it provided students and audiences alike with an uncommon “inside look” at the ancient world itself.

But what kind of look, and what kind of experience of the ancient Roman world, were questions Marquette alumna Megan Powell considered in her capacity as the production’s dramaturg. She likened Plautus to “French champagne or black-and-white movies, [with] virtues meant to be savored in a particular way.” To make the play appetizing to audiences in Milwaukee, with its well known preference for beer over champagne, would require a pronounced slant in performance. The characters were, as Powell noted, popular stereotypes; the plot is a series of transparent gaffes built around the convention of mistaken identity. The play is essentially a combination of earlier Greek models in the style of Menander, to which Plautus added songs, gags, puns, and topical allusions.

Too much academic analysis of this script, Powell contended, would turn the whole exercise into “so much

intellectual dry heaving [because] there's just not a lot to cough up." Powell discussed her gastrointestinal reservations with Wesley Savick, the play's director, and both agreed that it was important to discover an approach in performance that would somehow produce a shock of recognition among audiences that this play could be, Powell's misgivings about literary lineage notwithstanding, "the mother of all sitcoms." Plautus's skill was not to create great dramatic literature, she felt, but to create a sense of immediacy in performance. The "corporeal desires" driving all the characters in this play were the same desires found in so many American television comedies: "hunger, lust, and greed." Those desires audiences recognized in television sitcoms such as *Cheers* or *Married With Children*. In *The Menaechmus Twins*, she wrote, there were likewise no "Oedipal stirrings, just flesh and energy." She and director Savick even came up with a term for the style they wanted which, they felt, would provoke recognition among Milwaukee audiences. They called it "tweaked Roman."

To Savick and his designers that meant acknowledging, even embracing, anachronisms that are always the result of attempts to translate the ancient world. "Remember *Cleopatra*, the 1963 version with Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton?" asked costume designer Debra Krajec at a production meeting. Like its predecessors of the same title, filmed in 1917 with Theda Bara and in 1934 with Claudette Colbert, *Cleopatra* of 1963 featured costumes, make-up, hair styles, and jewelry that bespoke the decade in which it was filmed, not anything specific to the Mediterranean world in which Romans supposedly encountered the Queen of the Nile. In this film, as in every known Hollywood representation of the ancient world, anachronisms figured prominently. Elizabeth Taylor's page-boy wig, for example, was merely a 1960s approximation of Ptolemaic headgear; her gowns were cut in a distinct 1960s style to reveal the actress's cleavage and narrow waistline. In *Spartacus*, the Romans confronted not only a slave revolt but also Kirk Douglas sporting a flat-top crewcut in the title role.

Earlier movies featuring Romans (*Ben-Hur* as an example, both in the silent 1926 and the 1959 Cinemascope versions) used footwear, architecture, and make-up remote from historical Rome. *The Robe*, a Biblical epic of 1953 (and the first film ever shot in Cinemascope) with numerous scenes set in Rome, featured scores of non-period tunics and togas made of modern fabrics; most of the women's costumes required undergarments that separated the breasts distinctly, as fashion of the mid-1950s dictated (*Hollywood and History*, 199).

Authenticity, however, was not really an issue to Savick and the designers. Such anachronisms, indeed, are best considered as part of the charm that results when popular culture meets the Roman world; they are disjunctures accompanying most attempts to visualize the Romans—attempts that date at least to the *habits à la romaine* worn by eighteenth-century English actors like David Garrick in productions of *Coriolanus* and *The Roman Father* (Woods, 60). When American popular culture meets the ancient world, the results can be inadvertently hilarious, such as the aforementioned motion pictures, the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles, or Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas. Mixing classical motifs with American pluralism sometimes results in cultural pretentiousness; when consciously planned and embraced, the results might approximate the preposterousness Plautus aimed for when he wrote his comedies, "a process," as Peter Brook described it, "that parallels the original creative one" (Brook, 12). The director and designers thus set about, as they phrased it, "to boldly (sic) mix where man has never mixed before."

Since Menaechmus of Epidamnum was a businessman (and a wealthy one), the creators of the Marquette production decided he should wear a distinguished toga. A gray flannel, pinstripe model would have gone too far, Krajec reasoned, but she did allow both Menaechmi to wear black wing-tip shoes and horn-rimmed glasses as tokens of their status in the mercantile Mediterranean world. The costume of Peniculus ("The Sponge") signified a more obvious composite of American pop

culture and Rome. Krajec visualized this character as one whom the Epidamnian Menaechmus met in some den of iniquity; one would find his modern counterpart in Caesar's Palace. Such creatures are generally known as "lounge lizards," they frequently bedeck themselves with flashy jewelry and wear matching shoes and belt of patent leather, with corresponding jacket and trousers of polyester double knit known as the "leisure suit." Krajec's version was a green polyester shirtwaist with white piping—a woman's size 14 dress—that became a leisure toga. Menaechmus's wife wore her hair in early 1960s beehive style and sported late 1950s pointy breasts under a traditional caftan. Her father was an Orthodox Jew in a brown fedora, who found his way into the production via some glatt-kosher resort in the Catskills. He spoke with a Yiddish-inflected accent as he bemoaned the corrupt state of Roman morality, turning one typical Senex-like speech into a Borscht-Belt standup routine. Messenio, slave to the Syracusan Menaechmus, had been on the seas with his master, and had spent a lot of time on Mediterranean waterfronts. Why not base his look on the Marlon Brando character in the movie *On the Waterfront*? For Erotium, the production returned to Las Vegas, a town with as many courtesans as parasites in leisure suits. But this production saw Erotium not as a whore for hire, but as a classy whore for hire. She was also a dancer, for instance, and had enough money for the upkeep of an entire household that included a full-time cook (Cylindrus, a transvestite as well as conventional Roman epicure).

Scene designer Richard Nebel did not want to recreate the kind of stage space Plautus and the Romans may have used. "Most important to me," he said, "was a set that became an expression of the dualized world in which Menaechmus of Epidamnum lived, the kind of world many American businessmen live in, after all." In Nebel's view, such men have lives at home, very solid and respectable; they have additional lives at the office, at the gym, or on the road. In the case of the Epidamnian Menaechmus, his lives face each other on the

stage. Stage left was the granite, impressive residence from which he emerged every day to greet his friends, Romans, and countrymen. He then proceeded stage right to the house of Erotium, a fanciful and erotic pleasure palace. Its walls were of light stucco, adorned with colorful awnings and shutters. Placing dual worlds simultaneously on stage was part of Plautus's overall dramatic strategy; it facilitated the numerous mistaken identity routines, for example. Simultaneity was furthermore within the Roman tradition of staging comedy. Nebel and director Savick, however, went a step beyond simultaneity. They wanted to isolate the spheres in which Menaechmus moved, and they chose the ancient River Cayster (which actually ran through the city) to accomplish that task.

"Water onstage is always tricky," admitted designer Nebel, "but we chose a water hazard over ground rows, a fence, or anything rising from the stage floor in order to avoid obstructing sight lines. And water provides far more opportunity for sight gags than does a solid piece of scenery." The Cayster existed in two dimensions: it was painted on the floor, emerging from under a bridge upstage right, running downstage left between the two houses, eventually becoming three dimensional in a small wading pool. The water in the pool was recycled through a pump hidden in an adjoining bench; characters "swam" in the tributary and washed their faces in the pool. Water gushed from a pipe in the bench at times during the performance when Messenio alluded to urination or made visual reference to his genitalia.

The two-dimensionality of the River Cayster (flowing into three-dimensionality further downstage) reflected the two-dimensional features of the set design. Nebel used distorted perspective and exaggerated shadowing to create an altogether artificial sense of light and depth. Lombardy poplars upstage resembled those growing on the Italian peninsula, but shadows fell on them in an altogether exaggerated, cartoon-like way, giving the impression that sunlight in which they stood came from one direction. "The trees, the shrines, and other Roman



motifs upstage were there simply to tease the eye when the farce action downstage got a little slow," said Nebel.

The cartoon-like two-dimensionality of the set bolstered the cartoon-like antics of the actors. Critics from both Milwaukee dailies (the morning *Sentinel* and the afternoon *Journal*) noted the production's intense physicality and "outrageous stylization." Music from a four-man combo upstage center accompanied all the action, emphasizing pratfalls, tumbles, gyrations, vaults, spins, and bounces. The music made many of the routines seem more daring and cartoon-like than they actually were, and one patron was so outraged by what he saw on stage that he called the Marquette Department of Performing Arts (of which the writer of this essay serves as chair) to insist that the student actors be instructed in gymnastics. He subsequently wrote a letter to the student newspaper warning of danger to life and limb among the cast. The production was not without incident; one student actor sustained a groin muscle pull and another suffered a gash above the right eye requiring six stitches to close. Director Savick's intention with so many hijinks on the stage was not, however, simply to create as many sight gags as possible without regard for the student actors' safety; it was instead to encourage them in their search for the discovery of a language making the play comprehensible to contemporary audiences. The result was, as dramaturg Powell described, "a fly-by-the-seat-of-the-pants spontaneity" that produced "not a finished product so much as an organic, vibrant, continuing process." Fostering that process lies at the core of what Peter Brook meant by creating theatre that paralleled the playwright's experience of writing the play. It is also a process at the core of theatre education, in this instance the embodied translation of what Powell had earlier termed "corporeal desires." That translation the Romans would instantly have recognized as an on-stage study of *mens sana in corpore sano*.

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