

1 The origins of Roman theatre

Livy (Titus Livius in Latin, c. 59 BC–c. AD 17) wrote a history of Rome from its beginnings to his own day. Convinced that Rome had reached a state of moral decay by his time, Livy sought both to present examples of Rome’s superior morality in the years when she built her empire and to explain how moral decline set in. His description of the events of 364 BC includes an account of the origins of theatre at Rome that reflects both of these aims (*From the Founding of the City* 7.2).

- 1.1 Both in this year [365 BC] and in the next, when **Gaius Sulpicius Peticus and Gaius Licinius Stolo were consuls**, there was a plague. For that reason nothing worth recording happened, except that for the third time since the city had been founded there was a **lectisternium** to **pacify the gods**.

When neither human remedies nor divine help diminished the power of the plague, it is said that the Romans, their minds overcome by superstition, included even theatrical games among the rites they established in order to appease the gods’ anger. Such games were something new for this warlike people, who had previously known only **games in the circus**. The thing itself, however, was a small affair, and of foreign origin, as is generally the case when things first get started. Dancers, summoned from **Etruria**, dancing to tunes provided by

Gaius Sulpicius Peticus and Gaius Licinius Stolo were consuls Romans identified dates by the consuls (the two chief magistrates) who served during the year.

lectisternium a religious ritual at which couches – one for each of the major gods – were covered with cloth, and the gods were offered a banquet. The word *lectisternium* means literally ‘strewing of the couches’.

pacify the gods Roman religion held that disasters such as plagues occurred because the gods were angry, usually because a religious ritual had not been performed properly. It was believed that special rites, such as the rarely held *lectisternium*, could appease the gods’ anger.

games in the circus *circus* here means the *Circus Maximus*, a huge track surrounded by grandstands in the centre of Rome, where chariot-races had been held since Rome’s earliest days and where large events such as rock concerts are still held today.

Etruria the homeland of the Etruscans, from whom the name of modern Tuscany is derived (see map on p. x).

a **tibia** player, performed quite refined dances in the Etruscan manner, without singing or imitating any specific action. Then the youth began to mimic them, at the same time hurling insults at each other with rude verses; and their motions were in agreement with their voices. And so the institution was imported, and more frequent performances stirred up greater interest in it.

Professional actors got the name *histriones* because *ister* is the Etruscan name for a dancer. These actors did not exchange primitive rough verses similar to **Fescennine verses**, the way it had been done before; but they acted out **saturae** filled out with tunes, with a **written song** performed to the accompaniment of the *tibia* player, and with corresponding movement.

After some years **Livius Andronicus** first dared to go beyond *saturae* and produce a play with a plot. Like all playwrights of his day, he himself acted in his own plays. It is said that when he had worn out his voice from too many encores, he asked and received permission to have a slave stand in front of the *tibia* player and sing, while

tibia (also known by the plural form *tibiae*) a pair of pipes played simultaneously (see 1.2 and box on p. 3).

Fescennine verses insults, often obscene, which were directed at the bride and groom at wedding ceremonies and were also delivered on other occasions. Like the teasing of brides and grooms at modern weddings, the Fescennine verses probably started as an apotropaic ritual: that is, it was believed that subjecting fortunate people to insults would ward off evil spirits. The name Fescennine derives from the Etruscan town of Fescennia, from where the verses allegedly first came (see map on p. x).

saturae no examples of these *saturae* survive, and it is unknown what their exact nature was, though Livy's text suggests songs with a mixture of different tunes. The word *satura* elsewhere means 'stuffed full', as in *satura lanx*, a plate loaded down with food. It is unknown what if any relation there is between these dramatic *saturae* and the later non-dramatic poetic genre of *satira* (satire), in which poets mocked the foibles and vices of their contemporaries.

written song although this marks the beginning of written drama in Rome, much theatre remained unwritten improvisation throughout Roman history, including the **Atellan plays** mentioned later in this passage and farcical skits known as mimes (see p. 97). Livy almost certainly refers to the text of the songs here, not to musical notes. Although the Romans borrowed from the Greeks a system of musical notation, most music appears to have been learned orally.

Livius Andronicus Roman tradition held that in 240 BC Livius Andronicus (no relation to Titus Livius) translated Homer's *Odyssey* into Latin, thus producing the first work of Latin literature, and that in the same year he presented the first adaptations of Greek tragedies and comedies on the Roman stage. He is recorded to have been a freed slave from the Greek city of Tarentum in southern Italy (see map on p. x).

The *tibia*

The *tibia* was a woodwind instrument made up of two pipes. At the top end of each pipe was a double reed, similar to those used in modern oboes or bassoons. The *tibia* produced a piercing, buzz-like tone. The two pipes could play either in unison or with separate pitches and rhythms, though the Romans did not employ the kind of harmony used in Western music since the Renaissance. The *tibia* was the standard accompanying instrument for all Roman theatrical performances, and it also played an essential role elsewhere in Roman religious life: it was required for most sacrifices, and it accompanied the processions that began festivals. It was virtually identical to the *aulos*, which was used to accompany all genres of Greek theatre. Other sources tell us that unlike in classical Athens, where playwrights created their own melodies, in Rome the player of the *tibia* (called the *tibicen*) composed the melodies to go along with the playwright's words.

he performed the *canticum* with somewhat more energetic motion, because use of the voice did not get in the way. From then the practice began whereby someone else sang while the actor gestured, and only the *deverbia* were left to the actors' own voices.

Later, when this mode of drama was causing plays to develop beyond just laughter and scattered jokes, and acting had little by little changed into a professional skill, the youth left the performance of plays to professional actors, and they themselves began to toss back and forth jokes intermixed with verses, just as they had done in the old days. That was the origin of the pieces later called *exodia* and joined especially to *Atellan plays*. The Atellan plays were received from the *Oscans*. The youth held on to them and did not allow them to be polluted by the professional actors. For this reason the policy has remained that actors in Atellan plays are not

canticum, deverbia a *canticum* (plural *cantica*) was a passage of Roman drama sung to the accompaniment of the *tibia*. A *deverbium* (plural *deverbia*) was delivered without accompaniment.

exodia short farcical afterpieces appended to other dramas (compare the jigs of Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre). No examples of *exodia* survive.

Atellan plays short farcical plays with **stock characters**, thought to have come originally from Atella, a town in Campania south of Rome (see map on p. x). Atellan plays were often used as *exodia* after other plays, and they were improvised rather than based on a script. Although in the first century BC some authors began to write down Atellan plays, no examples of the genre survive.

Oscans an Italic people, ethnically related to the Romans, who inhabited Atella and the area around it.

removed from their tribes, and they can **serve in the army** as if they had no part in theatrical performance.

It seemed to me that just as I describe how various other institutions have grown from modest beginnings, I should also discuss the origins of the theatrical games, so that it will be clear how from reasonable beginnings this institution has now progressed to such a state of madness that **even great wealth can scarcely sustain it**.

- 1 The first written history of Rome was not produced until just about 200 BC. Almost the only written records of what happened in Rome before that date were bare lists of events such as plagues, wars and who held political offices, and records of some upper-class families. There was also an oral tradition of stories handed down over the generations. Given this mixture of possible sources, how reliable do you think Livy's story is likely to be?

2 What does this passage suggest about the nature of theatrical performance in Rome?

3 What does Livy himself think about theatre? How might his attitude have affected his account?

4 What does this passage tell us about Roman attitudes towards actors?

5 Romans encountered Greeks early in their history, trading with Greeks who had inhabited the southern part of Italy. By the early third century BC Rome had conquered the Greek cities of Italy, and in the first half of the second century BC the Romans gained control of mainland Greece. Exactly how much of Rome's earliest theatre was influenced by Greek theatre is unclear, but by the time of Livius Andronicus that influence was profound: many Roman plays were direct adaptations of Greek ones. Yet Livy makes no reference to Greek influence on Roman theatre. Why do you think he left the Greeks out?

6 Many have found unbelievable Livy's apparent claim that actors on the Roman stage often only mimed the sung portions of plays while someone else sang. Do you think such a mode of performance is possible?

removed from their tribes the citizenship of Rome was divided into 35 tribes for the purposes of voting. Most actors in Rome were subject to the loss of most citizen rights, including removal from their tribes (see 2.15).

serve in the army most actors in Rome were forbidden to serve in the army.

even great wealth can scarcely sustain it by Livy's day, in the last years of the Roman Republic, the theatrical games had become the site of intense political rivalry, as politicians tried to win popular support through ever more elaborate theatrical productions. We thus read, for example, of huge temporary theatres adorned with marble, glass and gold even though they were used for only a single festival (see 2.4) and of theatrical processions with hundreds of animals. It was also during Livy's lifetime that the first permanent stone theatre in the city of Rome was built: the massive and incredibly opulent Theatre of Pompey (55 BC, see 7.1). When, during the time Livy was writing, Rome changed from a republic to an empire under the rule of one man, the political competition ceased; but extravagant theatrical performances continued, as emperors used them to keep the goodwill of their subjects.

The Etruscans

The Etruscans are a people of unknown origin (their language is not related to any other ancient Italian languages). A number of very powerful Etruscan cities thrived between 800 and 300 BC, after which time they were conquered by Rome. Rome itself was probably under Etruscan rule in the sixth century BC, and the Etruscans left an unmistakable imprint on numerous aspects of Roman society, including architecture, religious practices and language: the Romans themselves were aware of the importance of the Etruscans in their own traditions, and some leading Romans boasted that they had Etruscan ancestors. No Etruscan literature survives, but they left behind an impressive array of artistic creations, most notably elaborate tomb paintings. Many of these paintings include dancers and players of the *tibia* (1.2), and one shows a group of spectators at some kind of performance (1.3).

This Etruscan **fresco** from the Tomb of the Leopards (early fifth century BC) in Tarquinia, north of Rome (see map on p. x), probably shows a celebration in honour of a person buried in the tomb. At the centre is a *tibia* player. The man on his right holds a bowl used for drinking wine called a *kylix*, the man on his left a lyre.

1.2



In this fresco from another Etruscan tomb in Tarquinia, the figures on a higher level, many wearing typically Etruscan round caps, are watching something (a dance? a theatrical presentation? a race or other athletic contest?) intently from a kind of grandstand. The reason for their raised-arm gestures is not clear. Below them are probably slaves, compelled to watch (or ignore) the event from below the stands where free persons sat. Compare the distinctions between free and slave spectators made much later by the prologue speaker in Plautus’ *The Little Carthaginian* (2.5).

1.3



- What do these frescoes suggest about Etruscan life?

2 Roman comedy in performance

The earliest Roman plays to survive, and the largest collection of plays we still have, are 21 comedies by Plautus (Titus Maccius Plautus, c. 264–c. 184 BC) and six by Terence (Publius Terentius Afer, c. 190–159 BC). We can learn much about the performance of these plays from the texts of the plays, works by later Roman authors and Roman art.

Getting a play to the stage

Almost all Roman plays were performed as part of religious festivals called *ludi* (games). As the Romans did not have the concept of the weekend, these festivals were important breaks in the daily schedule of work and business. Some *ludi* were regular annual festivals, such as the *Ludi Romani*, held every September in honour of Jupiter, king of the gods, and the *Ludi Megalenses*, held in April in honour of Cybele (the Great Mother). Leading citizens also held *ludi* at funerals for their relatives and to fulfil vows they had made to the gods. Besides theatrical performances of various types, *ludi* could also feature chariot-races, gladiatorial contests and other forms of entertainment such as boxing and dancing.

Production notices called *didascaliae*, preserved with the manuscripts of several plays, describe some of the personnel involved in theatrical *ludi*. This is the *didascalia* from Terence's *Phormio*.

- 2.1 Here begins Terence's *Phormio*. It was performed at the *Ludi Romani* under **curule aediles** Lucius Postumius Albinus and Lucius Cornelius Merula. Lucius Ambivius Turpio and Lucius Hatilius Praenestinus brought it to the stage. Flaccus, the slave of Claudius, produced the music on **unequal tibiae** through the

curule aediles magistrates responsible for both the *Ludi Romani* and the *Ludi Megalenses*, who also had jurisdiction over trade. Curule **aediles** were usually young aristocrats, who looked to successful games to help in their political careers.

unequal tibiae both pipes of equal *tibiae* were of the same length. In unequal *tibiae* the left pipe was longer than the right.

whole play. The play comes from the **Greek play** *The Petitioner* by **Apollodorus**. It was the fourth play of Terence produced, **in the consulship of Gaius Fannius and Marcus Valerius**.

- 1 What does the material preserved in the *didascalía* suggest about the personnel involved in mounting a theatrical production in Republican Rome?
 - 2 How do the activities of these people compare with what happens as a play comes to the stage in our day?
 - 3 Why do you think the authors of Roman comedy chose to adapt Greek plays rather than write new plays from scratch?

The business side of Roman theatre

Our knowledge of the economics of Roman theatre is sketchy. Passages like the *didascalía* in 2.1 appear to suggest that actor-producers such as Lucius Ambivius Turpio or Lucius Hatilius Praenestinus bought plays from playwrights, hired or owned actors and *tibia* players, and were paid by the magistrates in charge of games, like the curule aediles mentioned here, to put on the plays. The magistrates got some funds from the Senate and used their own resources as well. A businessman known as the **choragus** provided costumes and perhaps props: he appears to have been hired sometimes by the actor-producer, sometimes by the magistrate (see 2.24, 2.25). For a later period we have evidence of several other figures, including the *locator*, a kind of agent whose job was to hire out actors, and, under the emperors, the *procurator*, an important official whose job was to manage the *ludi*.

Greek play most, if not all, Roman comedies were adaptations of comedies written in Athens in the late fourth and early third centuries BC, called ‘New Comedies’ to distinguish them from the ‘Old Comedies’ written by Aristophanes and his contemporaries in the fifth and early fourth centuries. The writers of **New Comedy** – the greatest of whom was Menander (c. 344–c. 292 BC) – wrote domestic comedies that often revolved around the tortured but ultimately successful attempts of a young man to win the hand of a young woman despite all obstacles. The Roman playwrights kept these basic plots but made extensive changes, including the removal of the Greek plays’ choruses; deletion of some characters and expansion of others’ roles; addition of musical solos, verbal humour and farcical scenes; and substitution of dialogues for monologues and vice versa.

Apollodorus a contemporary of Menander.

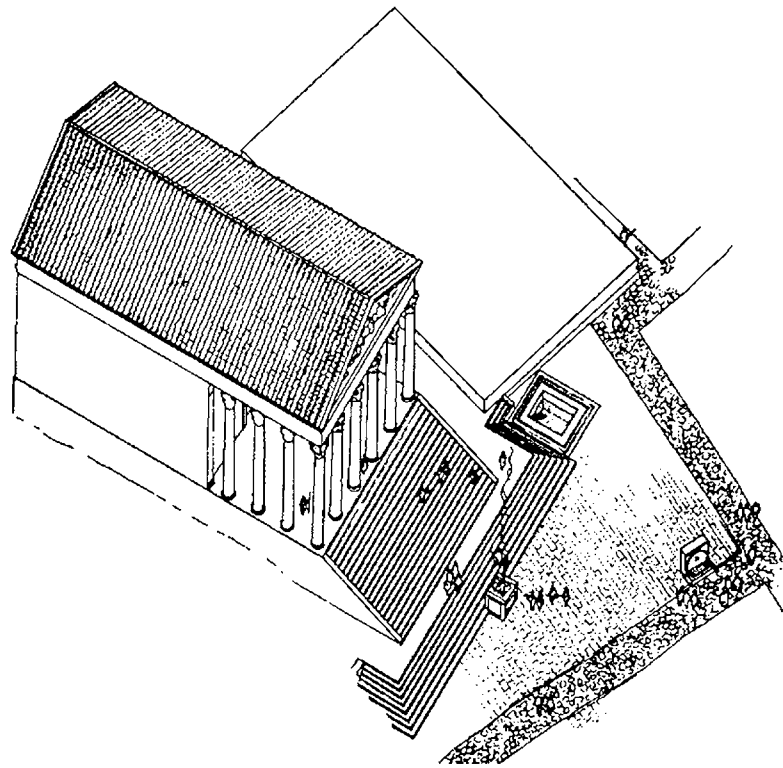
in the consulship of Gaius Fannius and Marcus Valerius 161 BC.

Performance conditions

As we saw in chapter 1, the city of Rome had no permanent stone theatre until 55 BC. The reason for the long delay was allegedly moral: leading citizens claimed that spending too much time in the theatre would corrupt the populace. In fact, those leaders are more likely to have been reluctant to allow a permanent place for citizens to assemble, fearing sedition. Before Rome had permanent theatres, dramatic performances required just two elements: a place for spectators to stand or sit (*cavea*), and a stage (*scaena*) with a backdrop (*scaenae frons*) and space in front of the backdrop (*proscenium*).

Often plays were performed in front of temples. Because Roman temples were raised high off the ground, the steps in front of a temple could serve as the *cavea*. Sander Goldberg has demonstrated (2.2) how during the *Ludi Megalenses*, for example, a stage was set up in front of the temple of the Great Mother, on the steps of which 1,300 or more spectators could sit and watch the plays.

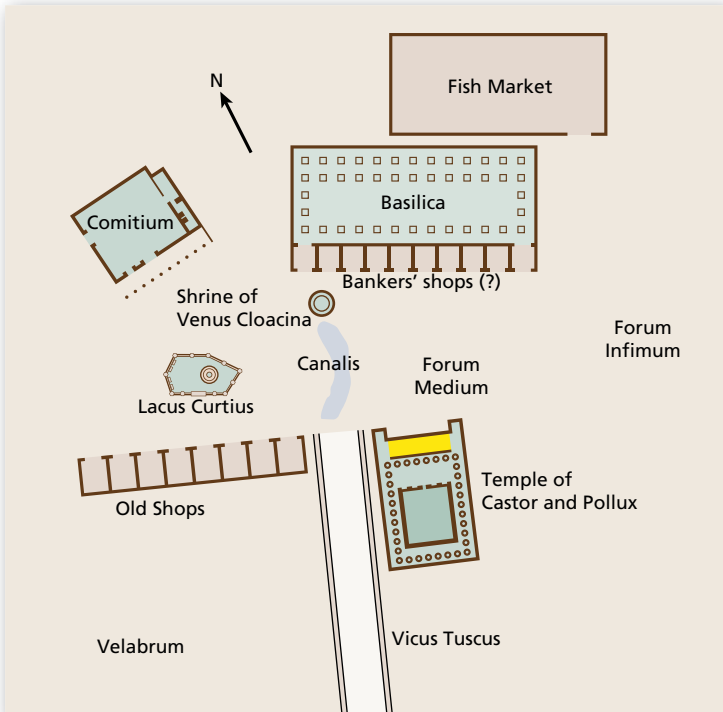
2.2



Reconstruction of the temple of the Great Mother on the Palatine Hill in Rome.

Sometimes plays were performed on a *scaena* set up in the **forum** (Rome’s central square). The plan in 2.3 shows the Roman forum in Plautus’ day. A character in Plautus’ *Curculio* gives a tour of the forum in which he mentions each of the places shown here, suggesting that that play may have been performed in the middle of the forum. Because *Curculio* is ostensibly set in the Greek city of Epidaurus, the tour of the forum is an extreme version of what modern scholars such as Niall Slater have called ‘metatheatre’ in Plautus’ plays: comical reminders that the supposedly Greek setting is really part of a theatrical performance in Rome.

2.3



Plautus’ forum.

At some point (probably after Plautus’ and Terence’s time) magistrates in charge of *ludi* began to set up larger temporary theatres that included a full semicircular *cavea* joined to a *scaenae frons* with a stage in front of it. By the first century BC some magistrates, eager to further their political careers through the generosity they showed in sponsoring games, started to create temporary theatres of enormous size and elaborate ornamentation. Pliny the Elder (AD 23–79) describes the most extravagant of these theatres in his encyclopedia (*Natural History* 36.114–15).