

## Classics Department and Society's Production of Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae*

Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae* was originally written and produced in a time of heightened political friction and national crisis. Aristophanes shockingly satirizes the position of women and their political power (or lack of), in a play that was performed in the aftermath of the failed oligarchic coup of 411BCE in ancient Athens. The background of the play also lies in the Thesmophoria festival, an annual all-female event. This religious holiday is poorly understood by modern scholars, but did provide married Athenian women with a freedom and space (it took place outside the city walls), that they did not receive at any other point in the year. However, Aristophanes' satire accentuates more the divisions in his own society (ones of class, sex, and trade), rather than conjuring up a critique of women per se. Groups on the edge of society- the poor and slaves for example- are as maligned as the women themselves. In a modern world in which the gap between rich and poor is ever growing, where atrocities are performed almost daily against women by groups such as Boko Haram, and where politics in most European countries is drifting closer and closer to the right, a performance of the *Thesmophoriazusae*, reevaluated in the light of events in the modern world, gave the cast an attempt to explore and act out some of these issues.

Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae* was produced and performed by members of Warwick Classics Department and Society, and translated by the Department's Teaching Fellow Clive Letchford, in the main theatre of the Warwick Arts Centre. It was given on 26th January in a public performance and on 27th January as part of a special festival day for schools. The size of the performance space, and the quantity of resources (in terms of sounds and lighting), were both greater than had previously been used by a Warwick Classics production, and allowed the cast and crew to make this often difficult play more manageable and understandable for a modern audience. In addition, it showcased what can be achieved by a collaborative project that was directed and performed by Undergraduates, but supported by members of the Classics Department at Warwick.

This collaborative project highlighted the range of skills that Warwick Classics Department and Society has at its disposal. The cast and crew were largely drawn from Undergraduates from within the Department, but individuals, from other departments, who are affiliated to the Society, were also involved. Closely working with the translator of the piece, Mr Clive Letchford, gave the crew more of an opportunity to understand and engage with the satire and comedy behind Aristophanes' work. Moreover, the support of Assistant Professor Michael Scott granted Warwick Classics the chance to put on performances for a larger and more diverse audience than ever before.

The festival day for the schools most obviously points to the success of this collaborative effort. During the morning a series of lectures and seminars were delivered by a number of Classics department staff as well as by the play's director. These included the reception of classical drama in both ancient and modern times, how dramatic texts can be translated and put on in the modern day, and how comedy transcends class, cultural, and national divides. This then, showed not only the interdisciplinary nature and potential of Classics, but also its diversity, and its ability to speak to a range of different audiences. Furthermore, a team of undergraduate Classics ambassadors were on hand, led by the Postgraduate Outreach Assistant, to manage the organization and running of the day, to take school groups from lecture to lecture, and answer questions from the school students throughout the day. The afternoon was then devoted to the Undergraduate performance of the *Thesmophoriazusae*, which was supported by a technical crew provided by Warwick Arts Centre.

This is not to forget that the public performance on the 26<sup>th</sup> January was attended by over c.300 people. Positively reviewed by the Boar, Warwick's Student newspaper, the play drew an audience consisting of current and past students, and members of the public from both the local area and further afield. Both Coventry and Leamington Spa had been subject to a large scale publicity campaign in the

weeks running up to the performance, and this was reflected in the number of persons who came from those areas. The Boar review can be read from the following link:

<http://theboar.org/2015/01/29/review-classics-department-society-aristophanes-thesmophoriazusae/#.VRjf4p4XCR>

The schools' festival performance was attended by 550 school children from a wide variety of types of school, studying a wide variety of subjects (Drama, English, Classical Civilization as well as Latin and Greek), and from a huge geographical spread. Schools attended from Cumbria, Bolton, Newport, London, Manchester, Shrewsbury as well as from all around the Warwick area. This widened the impact that the play was able to have, and also made the lecture participation more interactive due to the quantity of views and perspectives that such a spread gave. All students were canvassed for their views following the festival, and their responses gathered as part of an evidence document for a future potential departmental impact case-study.

Additionally the performance was filmed in order to produce a long-term tool for communicating ancient drama to a wide public audience. The video of the performance can now be viewed on-line in the Classics YouTube account:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fr-hX7pcn2g>

<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/classics/research/outreach/>

This collaborative project reached c. 850 people directly through its two performances, and has the ability to reach an unlimited further number through the videos on-line. Aristophanes' dramatic relationship with women is most often explored and understood through his *Lysistrata*. This is a play which shows Athenian society inverted by a rebellion of women wearied by near constant war. However, it was through his less well-known and not as explored work, the *Thesmophoriazusae*, that a range of political and social issues, relevant in the past and the present, were able to be evaluated and understood for a large and growing audience.

Classics, as a discipline, is often stereotyped as being only focussed on sources written in 'dead' languages, and though these sources are extremely important, the talks centred around the play accentuated the many-sided aspects of an education and study in Classics or Humanities can give. Classics and Ancient History still pertains on the international stage, the origins of many present structures and societal norms (such as the United Nations) lie within a world which is as complex and advanced as our own. Aristophanes is a playwright who also has an international fame and significance: he is often seen as a father-figure to comic writing and his slanderous and challenging plays questioned Athenian figures and institutions (Plato even blamed him for helping incite Socrates' death). Warwick and its Department plus the Classic's Society have contributed and will be able to continue to engage in this world-wide debate on Classical studies, performance of ancient plays, and Aristophanes, through having acted out Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae*.