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## CHAPTER 16



# A Poet without ‘Gravity’: Aristophanes on the Italian Stage

*Francesca Schironi*

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Aristophanes has enjoyed a certain public profile: I have counted at least seventy-four official productions that have taken place in Italy since 1911. The most popular play by far seems to be *Birds*, which has taken the stage in sixteen different productions. *Clouds* is also reasonably popular, having been staged in twelve different productions. There have also been some interesting rewritings and pastiches of more than one play. But particularly striking is the relative infrequency with which *Frogs* — in my view one of Aristophanes’ most engaging comedies — has been produced: it has only seen public performance twice, in 1976 and in 2002.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, it is one of those two productions of *Frogs* that attracted my attention: the most recent one, directed by Luca Ronconi at Syracuse in May 2002. As most people know by now, this performance excited many discussions, in Italy,<sup>2</sup> as well as abroad,<sup>3</sup> because of widespread suspicion that it had incurred censorship at the hands of Berlusconi’s government. I would like to reconsider this episode, not only because it is both striking and ambiguous, but above all because on closer inspection it seems to me a particularly good illustration of how theatre, and in particular ancient Greek and Roman theatre, ‘works’ in Italy.

The Festival of Classical Drama, which is held each year at the end of May in the Greek Theatre of Syracuse under the aegis of the INDA Foundation (Istituto Nazionale del Dramma Antico), is very famous. It was established in 1914 under the initiative of Mario Tommaso Gargallo. Furthermore, it was the distinguished Hellenist Ettore Romagnoli who provided the translation of Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, the play which inaugurated the Festival. In 1927, comedy was included in the programme in the form of *Clouds*, translated once again by Romagnoli, and performed in a very orthodox classicizing production, where all the actors except Strepsiades wore masks. Since then the Festival of Syracuse has enjoyed increasing popularity, although more for tragic productions than for comedy;<sup>4</sup> since 2001 it has been held every year instead of every two as before. In 2002 the programme comprised *Bacchae*, *Prometheus*, and *Frogs*; the director was Luca Ronconi, one of the most outstanding directors in Italy, and the artistic director of the Teatro Piccolo in Milan.

FIG. 16.1. First image of set for the Syracuse *Frogs*, 2002

On Saturday 18 May 2002, the evening before the première of this *Frogs*, a reception was held at the house of the prefect of Syracuse, Francesco Alecci. Among the invitees there were Luca Ronconi himself, Sergio Escobar, who was director of the Teatro Piccolo of Milan, the minister of equal opportunity for women Stefania Prestigiacomo, and Gianfranco Micciché, a Forza Italia official and Berlusconi's right-hand man in Sicily. During the dinner Micciché approached Ronconi, because he had been informed that in the staging of the *Frogs*, as a backdrop set, there would be four panels with the caricatured faces of Berlusconi, the Deputy Prime Minister Gianfranco Fini, the Northern League leader Umberto Bossi and another member of Fini's party Ignazio La Russa (fig. 16.1). Micciché argued that it did not seem fair to have those panels, because 'public theatre shouldn't criticize the people who give it money'. The minister Stefania Prestigiacomo intervened in the discussion on Micciché's side; the quarrel escalated and eventually Micciché and Prestigiacomo left the dinner.<sup>5</sup>

The next day, Sunday, the play opened, but without the panels. It was Ronconi himself who decided to remove them. At the end of the performance the coryphaea Annamaria Guarnieri pointed her finger towards empty frames. Ronconi, furthermore, made no appearance. Aside from these oddities, however, nothing indicated to the audience that there was any political tension underlying the performance they had attended.

On Monday, 20 May, a press-release by Ronconi was published in which he claimed to have been censored by Berlusconi's government, and added that he

wanted to leave Italy.<sup>6</sup> An official communiqué of the government followed in which Prime Minister Berlusconi maintained that he was disappointed that, at Syracuse, ‘ancient drama turned into a comedy of errors’, and insisted on his government’s unawareness of any censorship. He hoped that Ronconi would put the panels back again. ‘Of course’, Berlusconi continued, ‘that portrait of a tyrant with an Aristophanic flavour does not resemble me, but art has the right to choose — and miss — its targets.’<sup>7</sup> The directors of the Piccolo Teatro in Milan made haste to reply and defined the declaration of Berlusconi as an ‘act of intelligence and civility’.<sup>8</sup> Notwithstanding Berlusconi’s invitation, however, the panels were never put back up again and the show went on.

In an interview given by Ronconi and published in the *Corriere della Sera* on 21 May, the director commented on Berlusconi’s declaration in these terms: ‘Yes, of course, Berlusconi gave a civilized reply [...]. I am not going to put the panels up again; let’s put an end to it. Otherwise it would seem that first there was censorship, then an act of liberality from above. Let’s not exaggerate. [...] Berlusconi chose the right tone. Perhaps he understood that the presence of the panels on the stage did not reflect any political provocation or lack of respect.’<sup>9</sup>

To the obvious question, ‘and why then did you take them away?’, Ronconi answered: ‘it was a choice shared by every one of us in order to save the performance. Before any controversy, *Frogs* comes first, as does the right of the audience to follow Aristophanes. As a director and a man of the theatre, I participated in an obligatory choice. Better to avoid surprises, protests, accusations, or who knows what.’<sup>10</sup> And then: ‘The panels were a striking element, clearly, but an incidental one. If they had been fundamental to the performances we would have left them where they were.’<sup>11</sup>

This statement, at first quite puzzling (how could part of the set not be ‘fundamental’? And how could the director himself say that?), becomes clear in the light of certain choices that had been made concerning the staging at Syracuse. The text of *Frogs* chosen for the performance is basically faithful to the original. The only changes consisted in eliminating those details that were deeply embedded in the Athenian reality of the fifth century BC and thus difficult for a contemporary audience to grasp. The rest however was purely Aristophanes; indeed one could watch the comedy and follow it from the original text. The ‘updating’ related, instead, to the stage setting and the interpretation of the characters.

Ronconi’s interpretation of the set was ‘decadent’: there was a sense of death and shabbiness everywhere in this Underworld. The set was occupied only by the wrecks of cars (fig. 16.2). This is Ronconi’s Hades: a car-cemetery. As Ronconi later explained in a TV interview, this set was designed to be a sort of a mirror of the real city outside the theatre — Syracuse. Therefore the wrecked cars, which were actually taken from Syracuse’s dumps, tips and ‘car-cemeteries’, were intended to offer ‘the visual representation’ of the ‘real’ traffic noise of the city (the theatre at Syracuse is indeed in a very busy part of the town and the traffic can be heard when sitting in the cavea).

This decadent and postmodern scenario was in some ways the right set for Ronconi’s Dionysus: Ronconi had disempowered this god and lent him a strong,



FIG. 16.2. Second image of the set for the Syracuse *Frogs*, 2002

low-class Roman accent. Dionysus became thus a Pasolini character that, personally, I found rather too extreme. However, especially for an Italian audience, he represented a familiar and ubiquitous type of comic character, associated especially with actors such as Alberto Sordi, Nino Manfredi, and Carlo Verdone. This stock character is always from Rome and, it is usually implied, from a particular district of Rome, Monte Testaccio; in his strong accent he gives voice to a sort of popular wisdom, blended with a rather vulgar slapstick humour. Actually, this proletarian god fitted very well into the postmodern landscape of abandonment embodied by the discarded cars. The same applied to Heracles, defined by one of the actors as ‘gone hippy’, with golden necklaces and long, coloured hair, with grey roots growing in at the hairline.

What about the panels then? What had the panels of Berlusconi and Co. to do with this scenario? Actually, when watching the performance, one received the impression that Ronconi was right: the panels were not essential. The play, as Ronconi interpreted it, was perfect and complete without them. One had no feeling that there was anything missing, a gap, a void due to censorship. And when the play was performed again in March 2004 in Milan, the apparatus was the same: no panels. Again, the performance was very well received — everyone praised Ronconi’s interpretation and Aristophanes’ plea that art should be rescued in order to save his decadent society.<sup>12</sup>

The performance we saw at Syracuse and then in Milan was to large extent a convincing one. However, it was convincing not because of those missing panels, nor because of its proletarian and farcical Dionysus, but because of Aristophanes



four politicians, but 'in order to stage the play at any cost' becomes a pragmatic man of the theatre and destroys his own creation, apart from crying censorship after the show.<sup>15</sup>

No, Aristophanes was there. Notwithstanding all the efforts to have his words spoken feebly by a chorus of resigned initiates, he was indeed still speaking to us. Aristophanic comedy was still there in all its force — notwithstanding every effort to turn it into a farce, played by a clownish Dionysus.

Besides all its ambiguities, Ronconi's 2002 *Frogs* provided, above all, an instructive example of the way in which an Italian audience appropriates ancient drama. Theatre in Italy, especially in productions of the classical repertoire, is far less political than other European or American theatre.<sup>16</sup> In particular, Aristophanes becomes synonymous with humour, and his comedies are appreciated more as exceptionally forceful dramatic celebrations of fantastic carnival than as seriously engaged works of art. This is why, I think, that it is *Birds*, among all the Aristophanic plays, that has enjoyed the most success in Italy.

A recent and very famous version of *Birds* is revealing in this sense: *Gli Uccelli di Aristofane e altre utopie* (*The Birds of Aristophanes and Other Utopias*), directed by Tonino Conte and staged in Genoa in 2000 (on which see also the discussion by Treu in this volume, p. 260).<sup>17</sup> The play is a pot-pourri of Aristophanes: it is a bravura piece in which a political meaning is scarcely discernible. Rather, Aristophanes becomes the champion of Utopia. Another such revealing adaptation, this time directed by Ronconi himself, was *Utopia*, a collage from *Knights*, *Plutus*, *Birds*, *Lysistrata*, and *Ecclesiazusae*, staged in Venice in 1975 and characterized by a funfair and carnival atmosphere. Again, in 1976 the *Frogs* staged at Syracuse was notorious for its non-committal tone and for its 'carnavalesque' Dionysus, who highlighted the comic aspects of the play. Revealing in this sense is an article published in *Unità*, the journal of the Communist Party, by Aggeo Savioli and entitled, 'Aristofane come Scacciapensieri' ('Aristophanes as Pastime').<sup>18</sup>

And this idea of a utopian Aristophanes, an author whose primary concern is with a world of fantasy, seems to have come back in the interpretation of *Frogs* in 2002. In the TV interview, the actors and Ronconi himself speak often in terms of utopia; they seem to think that what Aristophanes does in this play is essentially to offer a utopian, hence unrealistic, solution to the problem of the decadence of the present by recalling a dead poet. This might be true, and I am the first to admit that assessing the true intentions of Aristophanes and the real meaning of his comedies is an extremely hard task, doomed ultimately to a turn into a dead end. However it is somewhat puzzling, if not indeed disturbing, that Aristophanic drama is in Italy mainly reduced to the level of farce or — in the best cases — interpreted as representing the triumph of carnival. Like the others, Ronconi, a great director with long experience and a true understanding of classical drama, chose here consistently to downplay the serious side of Aristophanes. His updating of the *Frogs* took the form of turning it into a decadent farce. The only open reference to the political world outside — those panels — was withdrawn before the première and indeed, as Ronconi himself said, it was not essential to the production. The panels were 'not essential' because nothing in the rest of Ronconi's staging (from the text



to the set) tried to translate Aristophanes' satire into a modern equivalent. The satiric part remained firmly in the past. We were reminded of contemporary Italy only by the farcical characters, drawn from the Italian movie industry, and by the car wrecks, mirroring Syracuse outside.

Ronconi's choice is understandable, and indeed the decision whether or not to update Aristophanes is a crucial one for any director. Updating surely entails a greater challenge and indeed risk, because any attempt to compete with Aristophanes has a high chance of failure. However, this peculiar compromise, in which the farcical dimension of the production is up-to-date, while the more serious one remains, instead, firmly anchored in the fifth century BC, is not only characteristic of the Italian approach to classical drama, but reveals a great deal about it. The lack of political concern in Italian classical theatre is a complex problem that cannot be exhausted in a short discussion. It involves Italian political and cultural history and is the result of the interplay of several factors.

First, Italy was not a unified country until 1860; our political sensitivity can be defined as 'primitive' compared to that of other European countries with a tradition of unity and political commitment, such as, for example, the UK or France. Our lack of political concern is evident in our recent political history, which has been far more concerned with political gossip than matters of substance; and it is reinforced by our individualism, which often acts as a burden and an obstacle to any serious political engagement.

The second factor is our cultural past. Italy has always considered herself to be the natural heir of the Roman world and, via the Romans, the legitimate heir of Greek culture. And although this sense played a great role in the rediscovery of classical authors during the Renaissance, it later had the contrary effect of preventing any attempt to reappropriate the classics in a more modern way. 'Updating' the classics in Italy is often a synonym for their betrayal. *Classics is tradition.*<sup>19</sup>

The third factor is our school curriculum. Latin and Greek are a permanent part of the Italian school curriculum in high school, a curriculum that was designed during the Fascist era by the philosopher Giovanni Gentile in 1923, and which is still almost the same. Thus, classical culture has always been supported and sustained by the government, and embodied in the state school system. This has led to a link between Classics and the conserving of tradition, if not actually between Classics and political conservatism. While the Italian academics to whom the classical world appeals are generally left-leaning, the spectators who enjoy classical drama in theatres are often more conservative. The Italian audience normally goes to a performance of a classical play with certain expectations, because they often happen to know the play (in the last year of high school, for example, the state curriculum prescribes the reading of an entire play in the original). Thus they do not like it when the text is changed or updated. And this, I would suggest, plays an important role in the choices of directors like Ronconi.

The fourth factor it is important to remember is that the Istituto Nazionale del Dramma Antico is a state institution which has been backed and funded by the Italian government since 1925. The most important festival of classical drama is therefore closely linked with the official establishment. This factor is well illustrated,



in conclusion, by another emblematic example: *Wasps* at Syracuse in May 2003. During that period one of the hottest news items consisted of the judicial problems faced by Berlusconi. So the choice of play could have offered a golden opportunity for a ‘modernizing’ interpretation of Aristophanes. Yet no such opportunity was taken. Everything during that trilogy of plays (Aristophanes’ *Wasps* was staged alongside Aeschylus’ *Persians* and *Eumenides*) was set firmly in the past.<sup>20</sup>

In comparison with this anodyne production, we should at least give Ronconi credit for having modernized his *Frogs* at all. But modernizing in Italy does not always mean politicizing. And the Italian term ‘commedia politica’ cannot be translated as English ‘political comedy’. A much more accurate translation would perhaps be ‘comic politics’.

## Notes to Chapter 16

1. For a survey of the most important productions of Aristophanes in 20th-c. Italy see Amoroso (1997).
2. This is a list of articles that appeared in the most important Italian newspapers. In *Corriere della Sera*: Corde (2002), Postiglione (2002a), and Postiglione (2002b) on 20 May 2002; Galluzzo (2002), Merlo (2002), Postiglione (2002c), Postiglione (2002d), and Vecchi (2002) on 21 May 2002. In *La Repubblica*: Bolzoni (2002a), Bolzoni and Quadri (2002), Jerkov (2002), Messina (2002), and Quadri (2002a) on 20 May 2002; and Quadri (2002b), Maltese (2002), Luzi (2002), De Marchis (2002), and Bolzoni (2002b) on 21 May 2002. In *La Stampa*: Anon. (2002a) on 20 May 2002; *La Mattina* (2002) on 21 May 2002; and M. D’Amico (2002) on 22 May 2002. In *Il Giornale*: Iadicicco (2002) on 20 May 2002; Guarini (2002), Pennacchi (2002), and Veneziani (2002) on 21 May 2002; and Sgarbi (2002) on 22 May 2002. In *Il Manifesto*: Bongi (2002) and Manzella (2002) on 21 May 2002. It is interesting to note that all the newspapers reported the news along the same lines regardless of their political orientation: *Il Giornale* is owned by Berlusconi, and *Il Manifesto* is the mouthpiece of Rifondazione Comunista.
3. Cf. for example Anon. (2002b); Anon. (2002c); Grimond (2002).
4. Aristophanes has been staged only seven times at Syracuse: *Clouds* in 1927, *Frogs* in 1976, *Acharnians* in 1994, *Thesmophoriazusae* in 2001, *Frogs* in 2002, *Wasps* in 2003, and *Ecclesiazusae* in 2004.
5. As Micciché explained in the interview to Venanzio Postiglione in Postiglione (2002b): ‘quando ho detto che l’autore greco non insultava i politici democratici ma soltanto i tiranni, lui mi ha risposto “Tiranni e affaristi”. E io: “Vuol dire che Berlusconi è un affarista?”. Mi ha risposto di sì. Senza problemi. Allora ho lasciato la cena, me ne sono andato’. (Translation: ‘when I said that the Greek author did not insult democratic politicians but tyrants, he replied: “Tyrants and profiteers”. So I asked: “Do you mean that Berlusconi is a profiteer?” and he said yes. Without problems. Then I left the dinner and went away’.) Similar explanations were given by Micciché to Attilio Bolzoni, in Bolzoni (2002a). All translations from the Italian are mine unless otherwise stated.
6. Cf. Anon. (2002a); Iadicicco (2002); Postiglione (2002a); Quadri (2002a).
7. ‘Ho letto con rincrescimento che a Siracusa il dramma antico si è trasformato in una commedia degli equivoci. Il governo, tutto il governo non sa neanche cosa sia la censura. Personalmente, mi preoccupa anche l’autocensura a dispetto. Spero che Ronconi, un artista da tutti apprezzato per il suo lavoro teatrale, rimetta subito al suo posto quel ritratto di tiranno in salsa aristofanea. Certo che non mi assomiglia, ma l’arte ha il diritto di scegliere, e di sbagliare, i suoi bersagli.’ These words were reported by all the major newspapers, regardless of their political orientations: cf. Bongi (2002); Galluzzo (2002); *La Mattina* (2002); Luzi (2002); Pennacchi (2002).
8. ‘Sergio Escobar e Luca Ronconi ritengono la dichiarazione del Presidente del consiglio un atto di grande intelligenza e civiltà, che solo un atteggiamento fazioso, che non appartiene loro, potrebbe non apprezzare nel suo significato’. Cf. Vecchi (2002).

9. Postiglione (2002c): 'Sì, certo, Berlusconi ha dato una risposta civile [...]. I pannelli non li rimetto in scena, basta. Altrimenti pare che, prima, ci sia stata la censura e, poi, dall'alto, l'atto di liberalità. Non esageriamo. [...] Ha scelto i toni giusti. Forse ha capito che l'idea dei manifesti sulla scena non nascondeva nessuna provocazione politica e nessuna mancanza di rispetto'. On Ronconi's sudden change of attitude, see Maltese (2002), 17.
10. Postiglione (2002c): 'È stata una scelta comune, concordata, per garantire lo spettacolo. Prima di ogni "querelle" vengono le Rane, viene il diritto degli spettatori a seguire Aristofane. Come regista, come uomo di teatro, ho condiviso una decisione obbligata. Meglio evitare sorprese, proteste, accuse o chissà cosa.'
11. Postiglione (2002c): 'Ma si poteva rinunciare così, senza problemi?' 'I pannelli erano un elemento vistoso, è chiaro, ma un accessorio. Se fossero stati determinanti, fondamentali per lo spettacolo, li avremmo lasciati dov'erano'. Similarly, see the interview with Ronconi in Bolzoni (2002b).
12. Cf. Principe (2004); Provvedini (2004).
13. My translation of Raffaele Cantarella's Italian translation of *Frogs* 353–68, as used in performance. My own translation of Aristophanes' *Frogs* 353–68: Let him be silent and stand aside from our sacred dances, | Whoever is ignorant of these sacred words or is not pure in his mind, | Whoever has never seen or danced the rites of the noble Muses, | And was never initiated in the mysteries of the bull-eating tongue of Cratinus, | Whoever likes the coarse jokes not at the right time, | Whoever does not settle hateful civil strife, and is not at peace with his fellow citizens, | But fans and stirs them up, craving for his private advantage: | Whoever accepts bribes when guiding the state tossed by the storm | Whoever betrays a fort or the ships or smuggles forbidden items, | From Aegina, a Thorycion, that wretched tax-collector, | Sending leather oar-pads, sails, and pitch to Epidauros, | Whoever convinces someone to give money to the enemies' ships | Whoever befouls the statues of Hecate while accompanying with the voice cyclic choruses | Whoever is a politician and bites off the pay of the poets | Because he has been ridiculed in the ancestral rites of Dionysus.'
14. Again, my translation of Cantarella's Italian translation of *Frogs* 731. My own translation of Aristophanes' *Frogs* 731–35: 'These citizen we use for everything, | These parvenus, whom before the city | Would not have used easily at random not even as scapegoats. | But at least now, fools, change your ways | And make use of honest people again.'
15. Messina (2002), 14: 'Ci sarebbe voluto Aristofane, per farci ridere. Purtroppo non c'era. [...] Così abbiamo potuto assistere solo a una mediocre commedia dei finti equivoci. In cui un regista così coraggioso, così temerario da individuare il Tiranno in quattro governanti, diventa un pragmatico uomo di teatro e cancella la sua invenzione, "per mandare comunque in scena lo spettacolo", salvo denuncia nel dopo teatro.'
16. Cf. Treu (2002) and (2003a).
17. A production by the Teatro della Tosse, which in 1988 produced *Viva la pace*, another pastiche from *Knights*, *Plutus*, *Birds*, *Lysistrata*, *Ecclesiazusae*, and *Clouds*, which, notwithstanding the pacifist meaning underlying it, still transformed the original into a burlesque. The style of opera buffa was adopted also in *Le donne di Aristofane*, another collage from *Lysistrata*, *Ecclesiazusae*, and *Thesmophoriazusae* by Giorgio Prosperi in 1969 at Segesta.
18. Cf. Savioli (1976).
19. Famous cases of Aristophanic stagings accused by the critics of having betrayed the original are *Birds* staged at Ostia and produced by INDA with the translation of Ettore Romagnoli in 1947; *Clouds* produced by the INDA and directed by Giulio Pacuvio in 1955; and *Peace* directed by Arnaldo Foà at Segesta in 1967. See Amoroso (1997), 558–60. For some reflections on Italian classicisms, see Rossi (1997).
20. Cf. Treu (2003b).

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