

Most people would reject out of hand the idea of going to see a play put on in ancient Greek, but they would be wrong to do so, as a recent successful production of Aristophanes' Wasps proved. The Classical Society of King's College, London, staged three evening performances and a matinee (specially for high schools) September 24-26 at Trinity College, Toronto. No performance had fewer than one hundred attending, and Friday night and the matinee were nearly sold out - yet not more than a fraction of the audience could read Greek. Even if they could, to understand it at conversational speed is quite another matter - especially when fellows like Sosias had a thick London accent!

The Wasps is not as widely read as the Frogs or the Clouds, but it is a good play nonetheless. In it Aristophanes sends up the whole Athenian legal system, wherein the people of Athens, represented by juries several hundred strong (even several thousand for some cases), heard and decided all trials. There were no judges to summarize evidence and explain the law, and no professional counsel to plead each side's case; every man had to speak for himself, and the jury decided on the basis of what they heard. Relevance as we think of it hardly counted. If a man had proven himself a good citizen in the past, the present oversight might be disregarded. If he had a dozen children to support (and they'd be produced in court, weeping and wailing), the jury might acquit him out of pity. They were easily swayed by emotional appeals and clever speaking. The system provided for a genuine 'trial by the people', but at a price.

In the Wasps, Philokleon, perhaps the most classic buffon ever created, is a crazy old man addicted to jury service. His son Bdelykleon has locked him up at home in an effort to break the habit, and the slapstick of the opening scene, where Philokleon tries every conceivable and inconceivable means of escaping, is hilarious. Our Philokleon was possibly the best-cast actor in the play; whether popping up through the chimney, swinging from the roof by a rope, or hanging onto a donkey's underside in a grotesque version of Odysseus' stunt, this man could reduce us to stitches just by the look in his eye (a wild look). But it was more than Philokleon's show. The cast were all amateurs - undergraduates at the University of London, in fact - but it hardly showed. Aristophanes' play is an early attempt to combine vaudeville and Shaw (as the latter immodestly claimed), and the many humorous and satiric opportunities afforded by such a mixture were well exploited. The parody of a tragic lament following on Philokleon's defeat in fair argument was superbly done. Bdelykleon fairly cried his heart out in pleading for the accused dog in the trial scene. (The dog was tried for stealing cheese. True to life his puppies were produced to grovel pathetically at the jury's feet.)

After the play one of the cast asked me if I agreed with those classicists who had castigated them for departing in places from the 'spirit' of the original. I did not; scholars may tend to pedantry, and what some of them mean by 'spirit' is really the 'letter'. The occasional English one-liner ('Missed again!' 'Has he gone?' 'Wrong!'), the sultry dance number by a (happily) unmasked Wasp in one of the choral odes, the stage hand outraged by the obscenity of one scene ('bloody students!'), the gay slave making eyes at uncomfortable members of the audience - all of this is well within the 'spirit' of Aristophanes' clownish, bawdy, irreverent comedy. One has to remember the problems facing the modern director as well; he's not doing an academic exercise, he's putting on an entertainment.

Greek plays are an old tradition in Britain, but they're rare on this side of the Atlantic. Nonetheless, should one ever be put on in your area, don't stay away just because it's all Greek to you.