

**The *Frogs* of Aristophanes**

by R.L. Fowler

At the dramatic festival of Dionysus in the spring of 405 B.C., the Athenians had little reason to celebrate. The long series of conflicts with Sparta and her allies known to history as the Peloponnesian War had been going on for over 25 years. The drain on Athens' resources was insufferable: the countryside was ravaged every year by the invading Spartans; the population, cooped up behind the walls of Athens, had to endure dreadful living conditions; the financial and military reserves of the city were all but exhausted. A victory at Arginusae in 406 had given brief cause for hope, but the incompetence of the admirals had resulted in unnecessary losses; the final defeat at Aegospotami was only a few months away.

But the plays went on all the same. Old Comedy, as Aristophanes' brand of humour is dubbed by scholars, was a riotous mixture of burlesque, obscenity, song, dance, and satire, with outrageously dressed characters, preposterous plots, and a very large thumb fixed permanently to the dramatist's nose. Public figures, whether politicians, generals or intellectuals, were a favourite target of abuse (libel laws hardly existed); the heroes of the plays were almost always ordinary folks who triumphed over the high and mighty. A festival atmosphere pervaded the whole performance, as if to say, who cares what tomorrow may bring, today we party.

In 405, however, not even Aristophanes could pretend that grim reality did not exist. Amid all its fun there is an unmistakably serious undertone to the *Frogs*. Aristophanes' plays had always dealt with political issues in one way

or another, and a conservative bias is detectable in the targets of his satire; but the earlier plays seemed to have a different spirit. If Aristophanes meant his mud-slinging to have any real effect on the political life of the city, it was in the free-for-all spirit of the democratic arena where the participants, for all their fine talk, were really just trying to win a big power game (sounds familiar, doesn't it?). But the tone of the *Frogs* is in deadly earnest, as if the situation had gone beyond party politics.

The hero of the play is the god of theatre himself, Dionysus. Sophocles and Euripides had both recently died, so the city lacked a proper writer of tragedies (none of the other tragedians was worth a fig in Dionysus' - and probably Aristophanes' - opinion.) Dionysus therefore decides to descend to the Underworld to fetch one of them back - Euripides, his favourite. Normally, a trip to Hades is the greatest of all heroic exploits, accomplished only by the likes of Odysseus or Herakles; Dionysus, who in Old Comedy is always portrayed as a coward, is a very unlikely he-man, and there is already great potential for comedy in this incongruous proposal. In the opening scenes Dionysus asks Herakles for directions ("How do I get to Hades?" "Oh, several ways come to mind - you could jump off a cliff, for instance, or hang yourself; poison is always good") and cuts a ridiculous figure in the great hero's lionskin and club, borrowed to fend off the innumerable boogys awaiting the traveller to Hades ("one ought to slay a monster or two on a trip like this, what?"). Of course, during the trip the slightest noise reduces Dionysus to shivering inertia, and he hides behind his redoubtable slave Xanthias (who must carry all the luggage).

The journey involves crossing a marsh in the grim ferryman Charon's boat; the marsh is inhabited by the famous chorus of frogs, whose croaking makes even the landlubber Dionysus pull to his oar with a will. On the other side of the marsh Dionysus, still disguised as Herakles, discovers that on his last visit the hero had run up a large hotel bill and absconded without paying; the landlady sets off to fetch the constabulary. Dionysus orders his slave to don the hero outfit; but when he does another character enters and greets his old friend Herakles with pleasure, inviting him to the mother of all parties. Xanthias is only too ready to accept! But Dionysus will hear none of it; he wants the costume back. Some more of this back-and-forth nonsense results in Xanthias wearing the costume as the police arrive, and Dionysus dressed as Xanthias. Upon being accused of the crime, Xanthias pleads innocence, and taking advantage of a cruel procedure in Athenians law, replies "if you don't believe me, you can torture my slave here and get the truth out of him." So the clever slave beats the god in the end, as the upside-down world of comedy requires.

In the middle of Old Comedies there was a definite break, like that between acts, in which the chorus-leader came forward and addressed the audience on issues of the day, often with little attempt on the playwright's part to relate the comments to what's been happening in the rest of the play. This section is known as the parabasis, which literally means "stepping forward," with reference to the action of the chorus-leader. In the *Frogs* this section at first appears to be as irrelevant as many other parabases, but its main message will be echoed in the dramatic action of the rest of the play. Aristophanes appeals for the leaders of Athens to bury their differences and pull together in the common cause. He has some specific suggestions regarding the forgiveness of exiled citizens, and begs his fellow Athenians to make sacrifices in this hour of supreme need. That way, even failure can be endured; for "if we hang ourselves, at least people may say, 'what a splendid rope!'"

The second half of the play contains a surprise. It seems there is a Professorship of Tragedy in Hades, a position occupied until quite recently by Aeschylus. But the upstart Euripides, who only arrived the day before yesterday, has challenged the right of the old master to sit in the chair. A contest is proposed. Who better than the god of theatre himself to adjudicate? And so the contest begins, with Dionysus as judge.

Aeschylus (who had fought at Marathon in 490 B.C.) is portrayed as a rugged representative of the good old days and all the solid, down-to-earth virtues that made Athens great. Euripides, by contrast, is made to stand for the dissolute, smart-alec, self-centred ways of the younger generation, which is more interested in hair-splitting arguments than in public service. The contest itself is full of the most ingenious and hilarious twists. Aristophanes here employs all his resources of parody and verbal wit. Aeschylus is ponderous, grandiloquent, sonorous and stuffy; Euripides is by turns clever, shocking, superficial and dainty — just like their plays, when seen through a comedian's spectacles. But it quickly becomes clear that the contest is drawn not upon literary lines, but upon moral ones. The poets stand for the periods in which they live; the older generation had built Athens up, the poet implies, but something is wrong with the way things are done now. Look at the mess we're in, after all. It can hardly be said that Aeschylus wins the contest on his literary merit; both dramatists receive equal measures of Aristophanes' penetrating parody. When Dionysus chooses to take Aeschylus back to Athens in spite of his earlier intentions, it is because he thinks Aeschylus can save the city. That is what poets are for, he says with much emphasis. The remark brings us up short; Aristophanes is a poet, too. His play, for all its uproarious humour, is at bottom a serious attempt to save the city. The key, he believes, is to return to the simpler virtues of the Marathon generation. Aristophanes probably idealized the "good old days"

too much — there was plenty of political bickering then too — but his contemporaries shared his notions, and an appeal for national unity in the name of the Marathon fighters, saviours of Greece, could hardly be more timely than in 405 B.C.

The play won first prize, but the appeal failed. Athens lost. But without that desperate crisis Aristophanes' moving combination of tears and laughter would never have been produced. It was his version of the "splendid rope."