

Does the Roman Playwright Still Influence People's Identity?

When Plautus' comedies were first performed in the early second century BCE, the contemporary audience would be aware of the fact that the characters on stage were Greeks, but also realize that the issues presented on stage were relevant to their own lives and their own national and social identity.

The situation is different, however, when a 21st-century audience watches a modern performance of a Plautine play, and different again when a modern playwright takes up Plautine motifs and subject matter.

That is what the Australian playwright David Williamson (b. 1942) did when he produced his first proper drama on a non-contemporary topic in 2004, entitled *Flatfoot. A Roman Comedy of Bad Manners* at its first performance. This play incorporates parts of Plautus' *Miles gloriosus* as well as elements of what modern scholars assume about the production of dramas in Republican Rome, since elements of Plautus' comedy have been ingeniously enclosed within a play about the Roman playwright's life and work: Plautus must convince his producer that his new play will be a hit; but as it has not been written, Plautus must act it out before the producer, making it up as he goes along. This is a remarkable invention and also a magnificent performative feat as a single actor played the trial scenes in the original performance (Drew Forsythe).

Williamson turned to Plautus since he was astonished to find himself laughing at a 2200-year-old work. He thought that Plautus had a great eye for human folly and weakness, which was the basis of comedy, and that Plautus' characters were types that audiences would recognize in their own lives. So he apparently believed Plautus' topics to be still relevant today and that engaging with them might contribute to shaping a modern audience's identity. But what do his (home) audiences think?

For in contrast to the great 'lifters' before him, such as Molière and Shakespeare, Williamson cannot expect his modern audiences to be entirely familiar with ancient comedy. At the same time, Williamson's plays, which he sees as scripts for performance rather than as literary texts, have been known for their close relationship to contemporary Australian society and for their social messages. Hence a number of questions arise, some of which actually surfaced at the original run: do audiences appreciate the relationship to the Plautine model? Or do they rather enjoy the story, and it is the performative feat that attracts them? Do they find the humour dated, or can the play still tell them something and does it help to shape their identity? Do they realize the entertaining engagement with topical but also perennial issues?

These are some of the questions that this paper will address. It will not just list references to Plautus, but go beyond this limited classicist approach and rather ask whether or how a present-day performance of a modern adaptation of Plautus might influence the audience's identity. This sounds like an obvious question, but there seems not to have been any research on this drama so far (apart from a few theatre reviews and general surveys of the playwright); and this situation will have to change.