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ba BOOM BOOM ba, ba BOOM BOOM

Here's an all-American book, from boomtown LA, imagining Plautus coming back to haunt us in fantasies of roustabout xenophobia. *Curculio* is 'Weevil', set way out yonder, out in the near east, in New Haven; *Persa* — 'Iran Man' — has a Wallywood filmset, in the California backyard; *Poenulus* 'Towelheads' cross the pond to Sarajevo, 'thinking of the happy Winter Olympics that preceded the grim siege (see volume introduction [39] under "Location" on the shelf life of this transposition). But again, because this is Plautus, the play is also set here — wherever "here" is' (195). You get the picture: this latest grapple with phallocratic Roman humour from our head-gardener of Priapism means to be an all-out assault on the obstructions and obstructiveness put in the way of presentist renovation of the ideological charge of these foul plays by their polite gamekeeper/gatekeeper police in classical scholarship.

Whatever you make of the ba-boom-barrage of blissful desecration on offer, there'll be no doubt where this model of a Classics for America *now* is coming from: 'supported by a major gift from Joan Palevsky' (recently deceased cultural LA philanthropist with Xerox and Intel megadollars to burn), *this* UCalPress book is at least as much about delivering on the sorority project of consolidating a professorial persona for mature feminist commentary within the academy ('twenty-five years' on, v) as it is about shaking up Roman Comedy. Amy Richlin (R) is going to tell *all*, from 'one of my earliest memories ... in a pair of yellow corduroy overalls' to 'this book ... dedicated to three Muses' (xi, xiv): 'Why this book', 'Why translate this way' ... (1, 2), and so on, the whole story from first principles to stop press adjustments. Here comes the get-it-on imperative of personalized explicitation (ba BOOM BOOM ba).
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The mission set for this high-profile author styling is to deliver to the wider community of compatriots a classical theatre which will impact for real, by taking these scripts out on the road, ‘still funny after two thousand years ...’, and stuffing them with ‘an inspired sampling of American popular culture’ (blurb). ‘Why?’ To trap live theatre audiences into emplotment within their own superpower recognition of what it is for masters of war to play the rest of the world for laughs. ‘Why the book?’ To show how to. And to show Classics the way (out?).

This translator will not disappear behind her triad of Roman classics - specially picked, not so much because they are lesser-known plays, but for the mess they make of political correctness, of all shifts to stay clean, and of whatever attempts to domesticate the comic ‘mix of fear, loathing, and curiosity’ (ibid.): picked, that is, so that we’ll have to see why they’ve been kept under wraps, why we must hide them no more. Getting out Rome and the Mysterious Orient means letting us have it with a comic-melodramatic pasting of reasons why we should think about the cultural work of ‘jokes’, and our hostess with the mostest will tag every move she makes: she must think about her title — a ‘facile’ blend of Jeeves and the Impending Doom with Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade (1), and we must think about this way to get us thinking on Orientalism in the wake of Said, so-called US foreign policy, entertainment, mass audience, and underclass splashback. Above all, ‘We don’t know what to do with these plays’ (3). What we do know is that whatever we do is out to commit everyone in sight. (Don’t) laugh, be damned.

So the theme throughout is: why is Professor Richlin pulling our legs, what sort of comedienne does she reckon she is, why is it a good idea for her to tell us to scrap her translation/‘transposition’ because it’s dated before publication, because its slang isn’t ours, because it can’t work for us, because we hate the idea that all-American jive rules the airwaves - and when are we supposed to hiss and boo at this favourite panto dame ...? It’s not that she’s left Plautus behind, but
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that the ways in which she has left him behind make a compelling way to get specific about what Plautus we mean to read and what we mean to read Plautus for. So I better say something 'back'. Why don't I agree that 'our analysis needs to be in terms of a single performance on a single day around 200BCE' (3)? Because (boom, boom): 'In reading Latin texts, we must cope not only with what they meant in their own time, but how they have been recycled through two thousand years of wars and empires' (192). I can't agree that 'not all audience members are being addressed at any one time (see Althusser on interpellation)' (3), because that's nuts. It must be wrong to chuck out the whole framework canonized in Fraenkel's *Elementi Plautini* as if Plautus and co. 'maybe used some pieces of plays they'd remembered or heard told ... for *Curculio* or *Persa* ... the idea of a "Greek original" becomes fairly meaningless' (14). No, the plugging of 'topicality' for the scripts in the form of current popular catchphrases won't wash, it's a chimera, and positing "parabasis moments" tied to breaking news' is explicitly about sparing Richlin's crowd from 'sections [which] are not that funny when translated' (35-8). Can anyone buy it: 'this genre is as ephemeral as "Be-Bop-a-Lula"' ... from the 180s to 50 BC (27)?

Why not try 'Curculio as vaudeville, Persa as a Kevin Smith [rapperama] project, and Poenulus as drawing-room comedy' (32)? Maybe we can manage the new casting (the toss argued at 'Funny Names', 40-3): Cornwallis and Beauregard meet Mme. Lola ..., and Weevil is up and away? Overall, we can have a ball with the unique combination of sustained metrical and idiolectal virtuosity and scrupulously professional attention to nuance and register in the many notes that star the text. R tells us (boo!) to have our own ideas of what we think on finding 'non-metrical translations of songs' appended to each of the scripts, and (yes, we are told) we need this because the cantica have been transposed into 'a particular comedian's voice ..., into songs "to the tune of", and into rhymed rap' (48-53): 'Whether this will work for readers, I have no idea.' But when each play's introduction spells out for each character
what's going on in R's head, 'Cornwallis's lines are here written for someone with an English accent who can sound snide; I was thinking of Richard E. Grant in Gosford Park. ... Beauregard's lines are here written for someone with a slight, gentlemanly Southern accent, who can be funny while pretending to be serious; I was thinking of Owen Wilson as in The Royal Tenenbaums. Mme. Lola's lines are here written for someone with a Cockney falsetto and visible beard stubble; I was thinking of Terry Jones ... for example as Mrs Bloke in Monty Python's The Meaning of Life. ...’ (62-3), we'll know we're being had, and this sister just quit Plautus for vanity publishing.

Imagine a(n) US Classics now. ‘The girls' song in Act I [of Towelheads] is in bacchiacs in the original, which is the same as the striptease beat ba BOOM BOOM ba, ba BOOM BOOM — and it is done here to the tune of “My heart Belongs to Daddy”. ... The girls' first duet reminded me of Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell in Gentlemen Prefer Blondes. Their lines are written for comic-sultry falsetto voices; I was thinking of Ru Paul for Tchotchka and someone less dignified for Katya, maybe Guy Pearce as in The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert (1994)’ (194-6). Is Plautus an opportunity or a reason to focus knowledge, skill, expertise, endeavour? I think that's R's real issue.

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