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Source: *Arion*, Third Series, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Winter, 2001), pp. 33-51

Published by: [Trustees of Boston University](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20163810>

Accessed: 12/11/2010 16:22

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A Funny Thing Happened on the Way from Brooklyn: Roman Comedy on Broadway and in Film

MARGARET MALAMUD

JEWISH HUMOR RETAINS even today a preoccupation with cultural assimilation. In the joke that follows, which circulates on the internet with the title “Hebonics,” that assimilation is represented literally as a process of translation: not from one language to another, but from one culture to another.

SAMPLE USAGE COMPARISONS

<i>Standard English Phrase</i>	<i>Hebonics Phrase</i>
“He walks slow”	“Like a fly in the ointment he walks”
“You’re sexy”	<i>[unknown concept]</i>
“Sorry, I do not know the time”	“What do I look like, a clock?”
“I hope things turn out for the best”	“You should BE so lucky”
“Anything can happen”	“It’s never so bad, it can’t get worse”

Jewish-American humor flourished in the earlier part of the twentieth century in the Borscht Belt:

A century ago the celebrated Borscht Belt began in Sullivan and Ulster counties in the Catskills Mountains of upstate New York. Thousands of Jews hungry for the mountain air, good food and American way of leisure came to the Catskills for vacation, and by the 1950s, more than a million people inhabited the summer world of bungalow colonies, summer camps and small hotels. “These institutions shaped American Jewish culture, enabling Jews to become more American while at the same time introducing the American public to immigrant Jewish culture,” said Phil Brown, professor of sociology. Today, the Borscht Belt has shrunk to include only a handful of major

resorts in the two-county Catskills area. The once teeming roads of the Borscht Belt are largely barren, with most hotels and bungalow colonies burned, decayed or destroyed. "Some people got bored with the old ways," said Brown. "It was too much for people who were becoming more American.

("Catskills Institute," Nov. 29, 1995 by
The Brown University News Bureau.)

The comedy produced by Borscht Belt comedians reflects the tensions and conflicts, both inner and social, generated by the difficult process of assimilation. But precisely because America is still a nation of immigrants, the humor of the Borscht Belt proved to have a durability that was not shared by the crumbling bungalows of the Catskills resorts in which it flourished. The plays of the Roman playwright Plautus, themselves "translations" or rewritings of Greek comedies, became the inspiration for an icon of Jewish-American humor: *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* was how Jewish-American humor met the classics.

ON THE WAY TO BROADWAY

Like Plautus who assimilated what was for him high culture, Greek New Comedy, and adapted it for popular Roman tastes, Larry Gelbart and Burt Shevelove took what was for them high culture, the "classics," and made Roman comedy popular by translating Plautine humor into vaudeville and burlesque, the Roman slave into a Jewish comic, and Rome into Brooklyn. The idea of adapting Plautus for Broadway had been Burt Shevelove's desire since his student days at Yale, where he had studied drama and written his first play based on Plautus. As head of Yale's student dramatic society, he had put on a production of Aristophanes' *Frogs* that was performed in the Yale swimming pool. Later, he and Stephen Sondheim collaborated on a stage production of *Frogs*. Shevelove went on to direct comedy routines for television shows starring Jack Benny and Art Carney, and he won Emmy Awards for directing the "The Red Buttons Show," "The Judy Garland

Show,” and “The Jack Paar Show,” but his interest in adapting classical comedy for modern theater never left him. In 1957 he got in touch with Larry Gelbart with the idea of writing a musical-comedy based on the works of Plautus.

Larry Gelbart’s background and education were rather different from that of the Yale-educated Shevelove. The son of Latvian immigrants, he spoke only Yiddish until he was four. At fifteen, his family moved from New York to Los Angeles, where his father became a barber for some Hollywood studios, and numbered among his personal clients the producer David Selznick and Danny Thomas who, having heard some of the teenager’s jokes, gave him a start writing for the radio show *Maxwell House Coffee Time*. At seventeen, Gelbart joined the staff at *Duffy’s Tavern*, an NBC radio comedy show. Having never gone to college, he called *Duffy’s* his higher education. In 1955 he joined Carl Reiner, Neil Simon, Mel Tolkin, and Mel Brooks writing comedy for the legendary *Sid Caesar’s Hour*, an experience he has described as “going to work every day of the week inside a Marx Brothers movie.”

Gelbart and Shevelove invited the young New York composer and songwriter Stephen Sondheim, another son of East European Jewish immigrants, to write the music and lyrics for their comedy. He too had read Plautus in translation and saw him as the originator of the situation comedy, the first to domesticate comedy. He liked the idea of making a musical based on Plautus and agreed to collaborate. George Abbott was hired to direct the play. No stranger to Roman comedies, Abbott had collaborated with Rodgers and Hart in a 1938 Broadway production of *The Boys from Syracuse* (revived in 1963) that drew heavily on Shakespeare’s *Comedy of Errors*, much of that in turn borrowed from Plautus’ *The Brothers Menaechmi*.

According to Gelbart, “Our goal was to construct a show based on Plautus, who, borrowing from the Greeks . . . taught amphitheater audiences up and down the original Caesar’s circuit to laugh for the first time at character and situation instead of those old staples they found so amusing, bloodshed and tragedy.” Gelbart and Shevelove wanted to fill what

they called a “vulgarity vacuum” on Broadway, to move away from the pretty musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein and Lerner and Loew, back to the vaudeville-burlesque-slapstick tradition on stage and in early film farces. They admired the zany slapstick humor of 1920s musicals and farces like the Marx Brothers’ *Cocanuts*. “Writers now think a punch line is something you wait in for a drink,” Gelbart complained. Plautus’ bawdy, witty, earthy humor seemed a perfect antidote to sticky sweet musicals like *Oklahoma*, *The King and I*, *South Pacific*, and *The Sound of Music*.

For Gelbart, Plautus was a comic master who created many of the comic conventions he and other comics love to use in their work: stand-up monologues, puns, malapropisms, tongue twisters, double-entendres, insults, disguise, slapstick, mistaken identity, mime, wit, and witlessness. If his undergraduate education was at *Duffy’s Tavern*, he said his post-graduate work was Plautus: “The Roman playwright Plautus was really my plotting teacher and I read his plays over and over, in adapting them for *Funny Thing*, dissecting his masterful construction and his manipulation of the characters.”

Gelbart described the five-year process of adapting Plautus in this way: “We began the task of digging around in the surviving plays . . . and began to take extracts from his works . . . cribbing a character here, a relationship there, creating a connective dramatic and musical tissue to bond our work to his by fashioning a cat’s cradle of a plot.” Indeed, a cat’s cradle well describes the plot of *Funny Thing*, a densely woven pastiche of narrative strands, stock characters, and comic ploys and devices taken from the *Casina*, *Pseudolus*, and *Miles Gloriosus*. According to Gelbart, “We used Plautus’ cunning slave, braggart-warrior, hen-pecking shrewish wife and cringing husband, moonstruck young man, the lass with unused body and brain, doddering old geezer barely able to see or to hear, cross-dressing and female impersonation.” Like the trickster-slave of Plautus’ plays, Pseudolus is the source of the comic action on stage and the ironic commentator on events as he engages in dialogue with the audience. Like Plautus’ slaves he is at once a member of the cast and the audience.

The star of the play, the clever and self-promoting slave Pseudolus (Zero Mostel), introduces himself and the main characters of the comedy in Sondheim's brilliant opening number, "Comedy Tonight." The song sets the tone of the play and prepares the audience for the comic chaos about to unfold on stage: "Nothing with gods, / Nothing with fate. / Weighty affairs will just have to wait." The characters are not gods or elites but "philanderers and panderers," the scoundrels and rogues who inhabit the back streets of Rome. Tony Walton's sets presented spectators with the three houses of the principle characters, located in a seedy street in a rather run-down Roman neighborhood.

The plot centers on the schemes of Pseudolus to forward the love-affair of his young master, Hero and Philia, a young virgin living in the brothel next door. Hero is being thwarted by a pimp, Lycus, who runs the brothel. Hero's parents, the master Senex, and the mistress Domina, go off to visit Domina's mother, leaving their chief slave, Hysterium, in charge of the household. In exchange for his freedom, Pseudolus agrees to help Hero get Philia, who has been sold to the soldier Miles Gloriosus. Various complications ensue: Senex returns early, Philia mistakes him for Miles Gloriosus; and soon Miles Gloriosus arrives demanding his bride. Confusion and mistaken identities reach a climax when Hysterium impersonates Philia to cover up an earlier scheme in which the soldier was told she had died of the plague. In the end, Philia and Miles turn out to be the long-lost children of Erronius, the doddering old man next door; Hero and Philia are united; and Pseudolus gets his freedom.

It need hardly be said that almost all of the action, the characters, and the comic devices are lifted from Plautus. In the *Pseudolus*, a young man madly in love with a courtesan lacks the money to purchase her. When instead a soldier buys the girl and leaves her with a pimp, the young man's cunning slave contrives to deceive the pimp and get the girl, who turns out to be free. In the *Casina*, on which *Funny Thing* draws most heavily, we find conniving slaves, father-son rivalry for the maid-servant Casina, and a wedding where a male slave dresses

up as Casina and tricks the father, who thinks he is marrying the girl. In the end, the young man marries Casina and she is recognized as the daughter of a citizen. Finally, *Funny Thing's* outrageously vain and pompous soldier, convinced of his strength and irresistible beauty is modeled on the soldier in *Miles Gloriosus*.

BROADWAY'S ROME

Plautus' plays provided the basic ingredients and narrative structure of the play, but naturally Gelbart and Shevelove shaped the material for American audiences. Perhaps the key difference between the Roman material and the American comedy is the emphasis placed on Pseudolus' desire for liberty. Erich Segal has pointed out that in the Roman plays a slave may be elevated above his master by his wit and cleverness, and while a reversal of norms and inversion of normal relationships and status do occur, liberty is neither sought nor granted. At the end of Plautus' play *Pseudolus*, for example, Pseudolus gets drunk, he is not set free. As Segal put it, the Plautine slave "would rather take liberty than receive it." In *Funny Thing*, however, Pseudolus wants more than anything to be free, and it is this desire that fuels his frenetic comic maneuverings. Pseudolus' song, "Free," voices American, not Roman sentiments: "Be you anything from king to baker of cakes / You're a vegetable unless you're free. / It's a little word but oh, the difference it makes. / It's the necessary essence of democracy, / It's the thing that every slave should have the right to be . . ." When these words were sung by the Jewish Zero Mostel, who was black-listed during the McCarthy era, and by a black woman, Whoopi Goldberg, who played Pseudolus in the recent revival, they took on an added ironic resonance. The ethnic/racial identity of the performer extends and sharpens the meaning of freedom: rather than a general American value, it easily takes on a particular edge.

Equally absent from the Roman plays is the prominent attention *Funny Thing* gives to the display of female sexuality. *Funny Thing* gets a lot of bawdy comic mileage out of the

courtesans next door. The primary sources of *Funny Thing's* images of Roman sexual license and debauchery lie in Hollywood's cinematic depictions of the decadence that was Rome and in the new loosening of restraints on the pursuit of sexual pleasure that characterized the late 1950s and 1960s. Pseudolus and Hero's visit to the brothel provides the occasion for the display of male sexual fantasies when the courtesans perform erotic dances for the prospective customers: Tintinabula does an oriental dance dressed in a belly-dancer outfit; Panacea wears a bikini made of grapes and dances to striptease music; the Geminae (twins) pander to the fantasy of possessing two women at once; Vibrata is a wild animal of a woman who wears skins and dances to jungle music; and Gymnasia is a dominatrix, a statuesque woman in thigh-high boots who cracks a whip and spansks Pseudolus. If Rome has often been the site of projected sexual fantasies and desires, these displays reflect not only this tradition but also the particular tastes of the "swinging" early 1960s—certainly not ancient Roman sexual attitudes and desires.

The brothel scene is indebted to Hollywood as well as to *Playboy*. Hollywood epics set in Roman antiquity typically feature spectacles of Roman excess and debauchery. In the 1960s, these images of license and promiscuity were given a positive spin, and there was little desire to censor or condemn them; they exemplified the freedom and pleasure of uninhibited sex emblematic of the time. Caesars Palace in Las Vegas famously translated cinematic visions of Roman decadence and indulgence into a marble pleasure palace in the desert where guests were made to feel as if they were participating in imperial debauchery and excess. In a lengthy 1965 article entitled "Sex and the Cinema," *Playboy* featured stills of scenes censored from Hollywood films, including a number of excised stills from films set in Roman antiquity. And the motto carved in Latin above the door of Hugh Hefner's Playboy Mansion in Chicago proclaimed: "*Si non oscillas, noli tintinnare*" (If you don't swing, don't ring!)—seemingly promising a perpetual Roman orgy inside. The scantily clad, voluptuous courtesans resemble fantasy pinups in *Playboy*, ready to

participate in one of cinema's Roman orgies.

PLAUTUS AND BORSCHT BELT HUMOR

Gelbart and Shevelove translate Plautus' "funny things"—his dazzling wordplay, puns, double-entendres, alliteration, and neologisms, and his colloquial, earthy, and slangy language—by drawing on idioms of American-Jewish humor and the vaudeville tradition. This racy humor and wit characterized East-coast Jewish comedians like Eddie Cantor; the fast-talking, pun- and slapstick-filled routines of the Marx Brothers; the vaudevillian-burlesque style of Milton Berle, and the comic antics of Sid Caesar's *Caesar's Hour*, where, of course, Gelbart had worked. In the heyday of vaudeville, a typical program had "something for everyone"—a variety of acts drawing on opera, drama, dance, pantomime, farce, and burlesque. Its humor often came from spoofs of the serious arts: Fanny Brice, for example, frequently performed a dance satire called the "Dying Swan" and burlesques of the Martha Graham's modern dance. There were parodies of Shakespeare, especially scenes from *Antony and Cleopatra*, burlesques of toga drama (a spoof of *Quo Vadis* called *Quo Vass iss?*), and plenty of pantomime, slapstick, juggling, and acrobatics. With the coming of movies, live vaudeville waned as stars like Charlie Chaplin, Eddie Cantor, and the Marx Brothers flocked to Hollywood to film their acts. However, live comedy continued in New York City and in the resorts of the Catskills, and radio shows and later television, especially shows like *The Milton Berle Show*, absorbed the talents of many and helped keep the vaudeville-burlesque tradition alive.

Funny Thing's dependence on vaudeville's verbal wit and physicality is inscribed in the authors' preface to the script: "This is a scenario for vaudevillians. There are many details omitted from the script. They are part of any comedian's bag of tricks. The double-take, the mad walk, the sighs, the smirks, the stammerings. All these and more are intended to be supplied by the actor and, hopefully, the reader." Zero Mostel and Phil Silvers had in abundance the qualities critic Robert

Lytell defined as characteristic of the best vaudeville performers: “Human horsepower, size, energy, zingo . . . These people have a fire in their belly which makes you sit up and listen whether you want to or not . . . They seize you and do pretty nearly everything they want with you and while it is going on, you sit with your mouth open and laugh and laugh again.” Zero Mostel played the slave in the role of popular Jewish entertainer—outspoken, insolent, full of tricks and guile, coarse jokes, leers and winks, word play and alliteration (as Pseudolus says of Miles Gloriosus, “He raped Thrace thrice?”). Others in the original performance had worked in vaudeville, and this training aided and shaped their performances. Phil Silvers was initially hesitant about taking the role of the pimp Lycus because he thought he might be over his head in a classical Roman comedy. But Gelbart assured him that “he could use more of himself, more of his professional experience in our piece than he could ever imagine; that, despite the show’s classic setting, it was grounded in the very traditions of vaudeville and burlesque that had so shaped and sharpened his skills.” Silver’s performance was appreciated in just these terms; a reviewer for NBC noted that: “Mr. Silvers sounds as if he arrived in Rome via Flatbush [Avenue] but that’s part of his charm.”

“In its original incarnation, *Funny Thing* was written for a troupe of ex-vaudevillians—to whom shtick was second nature” (*Boston Phoenix*, July 7, 1981). This “shtick” was heavily influenced by a New York Jewish-American humor and sensibility and was fed by visits to those Jewish resorts in the Catskills. The veteran Catskills performer Jack Eagle defines Catskills humor as “Jewish humor that has been going on in Jewish life since its inception. It’s often black. The only way Jews have been able to survive all these years is by thinking, by living by their wits. When you’re at the bottom, you live by your wits. We’re used to the indignity of failure. We’re used to rejection.” It draws on a particular view of life, one in which disaster is expected, summed up in the saying: “The Cossacks are always coming”; and it is filled with pathos, irony, self-mockery, sarcasm, and earthy vulgarity. This shtetel humor was transformed in the Catskills where it was performed in front

of an audience of assimilated Jews.

According to Steve Rossi, another veteran Catskills comic, “I see the Catskills as basically vaudeville. It’s Jewish-oriented comedy that has become more Gentile-oriented.” Here, the career of Sol Zim is instructive. Zim, a Dean Martin look-alike, appeared as both a cantor and a pop singer at the Catskills in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The ease with which he combined his religious and secular careers signals how far the assimilation of Jews into American society had come since the days of the famous 1927 film *The Jazz Singer*. That film, the first talkie, starred Al Jolson, who played the son of an immigrant East European cantor in New York. The film explored the problems of identity and assimilation that troubled first generation immigrants in New York City. The plot is centered around the son’s struggle, between his desire to assimilate and become a jazz singer and his loyalty to his ethnic background and his father’s insistence that he become a cantor. By the 1950s that dilemma was largely resolved, or at least muted; as Sol Zim put it: “I am the Jazz Singer with a twist: I started out as a cantor and became a pop singer and managed to combine both.”

Vacations in the Catskills marked successful assimilation into middle-class American life, and Jewish assimilation and enjoyment of America as the horn of plenty were what visitors to the Catskills celebrated, even as they retreated from the gentile world to their own colony. Jewish comics whose shtick focused on alienation bombed. Catskill audiences walked out on Woody Allen’s neurotic intellectual angst, Jerry Lewis’ moronic high-strung adolescent male persona, and Lenny Bruce’s searing honesty and lacerating wit. According to Eagle, “Lenny Bruce spoke the truth, but he was ‘too true,’ if you can say such a thing, for the Mountains—too hip, too outrageous, ahead of his time.” Instead, one of the most popular daytime entertainments at Grossinger’s was Simon Sez, a game in which participants must obey the instructions of Simon and do exactly as he “sez.” The game might be read as a metaphor for assimilation: participants who successfully copy Simon’s actions and obey his commands are rewarded and those who fail to con-

form and obey the leader are weeded out.

Gelbart and Shevelove's adaptation of Plautus' Roman comedies deliberately avoided critiquing either Roman or American society. When Stephen Sondheim composed lyrics which did contain satirical material, Shevelove vetoed them, saying he wanted *Funny Thing* to be strictly a domestic farce and not a commentary: he told Sondheim that there should be no political or satirical edge to the songs.

A JEWISH-AMERICAN ROME

Gelbart and Shevelove's adaptation of Roman comedy for Broadway fits into a long tradition in American theater of transforming arts associated with high culture into popular culture. Rodgers and Hart's 1938 *The Boys From Syracuse*, and Cole Porter's 1947 *Kiss Me, Kate*, loosely based on *The Taming of the Shrew*, are two Broadway musical prototypes for *Funny Thing*. Gelbart and Shevelove's additions to and shaping of Plautus offered comic relief from usual images of Rome and Romans, redefining Rome in their own image. Like Plautus, who thumbed his nose at the conventions of Greek New Comedy, part of the 'high' culture of his day, Gelbart and Shevelove punctured the well-known image of a monumental city inhabited by toga-clad, sober, patriotic, and sturdy citizens of a virtuous Republic. Nor is their Rome the decadent, corrupt imperial city of tyrants and mad emperors, an image that had regularly cropped up in political rhetoric as an admonition and in popular Hollywood films where it has been exploited.

Like Plautus' Rome, the Rome of *Funny Thing* is inhabited by low-level tricksters, rogues, and panderers, not patricians and senators; its focus is a household in a not-so-fashionable quarter of Rome like the *Subura* rather than a palace on the Palatine Hill. In American terms, this is Flatbush Avenue rather than Park Avenue. Reviewers noted with pleasure the musical's "Jewish-American humor," and called its stars "Catskills comics" and its Rome a "Brooklyn-on-the-Tiber."

"Why is it," Gelbart asked, "that the [American] West is

supposed to say America to people? To me, Milton Berle, with his eastern cheekiness . . . is as American as a stage Mom and apple pie." Berle's long career spanned vaudeville, radio, and television, and vaudeville and burlesque remained staples of his acts. Describing Berle's comic style and performance Gelbart commented: "Now that is America, not John Wayne and the West." For him, Milton Berle was the "fast-talking, hip, flip, eastern urban wise guy" who embodied his America. For comics like Gelbart, Berle was "a comic George Washington." Berle's style was kinetic, electric, slapstick, and, according to Gelbart, his gags were timeless—the same as those "that must have caused Nero to giggle." Hard as it may be to imagine *Funny Thing* without Zero Mostel, Gelbart and Shevelove had first offered Milton Berle the role of Pseudolus. It was only when Berle declined that they put Mostel, another vital, bawdy, Jewish-American comic in a toga and let him loose on stage.

THE CINEMATIC FORUM

Richard Lester's cinematic interpretation and manipulation of the original Broadway production adds another fascinating layer to the transmission and translation process. While Shevelove and Gelbart deliberately avoided political or social commentary in their musical comedy, the director Richard Lester (known for *A Hard Day's Night* and *Help!*), hired to make the film version of the comedy, had a different agenda. Lester aimed for more than filming a stage farce; he claimed his vision had "nothing to do with all those Broadway Jewish jokes." He wanted his film comedy to expose the seamy underside of Rome and highlight its social and economic injustices, and he wanted to parody Hollywood film genres, particularly the historical epic and its images of ancient Rome.

However, the producer Melvin Frank, one of the powerful Jewish moguls of the Hollywood film industry, wanted a film of the Broadway production, a bawdy farce. Lester complained about his lack of control and freedom as a director; he was used to complete artistic control of his films, but Frank was

a product of the old Hollywood studio system where producers had final artistic control and authority over films. It was not a happy relationship. Frank hated Lester's attempts to inject some of the harshness of Roman society into the film, and he locked up some of the footage Lester had shot in a vault so that the director could not get at it. Yet, by rewriting and adding to the screenplay, particularly the scenes involving Hero, planning the musical numbers, and working closely with cinematographer Nicholas Roeg, Lester was able to convey some of his vision of Rome and his critique of Hollywood films. Faced with Frank's demands for a Broadway farce, and having been handed a completed script, Lester tried to control the final product by developing his own fast-paced editorial style, adding to the script where he could, and inserting shots that subverted the surface meaning of the musical numbers.

The original Broadway farce depended on a vaudeville style and pace that belonged to the live theater, and in coming up with a cinematic style Lester turned back to the traditions of early cinema farce, especially the films of Buster Keaton, one of his childhood idols, who played Erronius in the film. Lester used a number of sight gags: a man in the market painting zebra stripes on a donkey; a pigeon, dispatched by Hero with a message for Philia inscribed on a wax tablet, is unable to carry the weight and falls to the ground; a horse sits stolidly in a steam bath because Hero needs mare's sweat for an aphrodisiac he is concocting. Yet Lester combined these sight gags with a fast-paced rhythm through editing to achieve his own comic style, which one reviewer called "cinemafarce."

Lester and Roeg also added their own comic dimensions to scenes from the original play, such as the scenes where Hero and Philia sing "I'm Lovely" to each other; later, Pseudolus and Hysterium, in drag, reprise the scene. Lester filmed Hero and the blonde Philia singing to each other as they happily trip through misty fields and soft-focus green woods in a series of mock-romantic dissolves punctuated by farcical collisions with trees in a kind of pastiche of a television commercial. The lyrics of "I'm Lovely" are solipsistic and the genre

of love song becomes ridiculous by its setting and performance. This satiric scene of romantic love is itself satirized when Hysterium, in obvious and ridiculous drag, and Pseudolus reprise it.

According to Lester, one of his main interests was to expose the injustices of life in ancient Rome. He became fascinated with the “sordid” aspects of ancient Roman society and urbanism, and wanted to portray the squalor beneath the splendid surface of Rome, especially the utter disregard for the slave’s life and its humiliations. Lester tried to convey this visually with shots of slaves being bought, sold, or beaten. A scene in which Pseudolus asks passers-by for assistance and is then kicked and beaten by each integrates a display of brutality into the comedy. In a parody of a set-piece of a Busby Berkeley musical, Zero Mostel, Jack Gilford, Michael Hordern, and Phil Silvers dance in a toga kickline on top of an aqueduct and then cakewalk through the house singing “Everybody Ought to Have a Maid.” Yet Lester inserts shots of slaves toiling away at their menial, degrading jobs as the main characters sing and dance. Thus, he establishes a contradiction between the sentiments of the song and the visual image on the screen. By making the image convey the reality of the life of a maid, Lester disrupted the overt message of the song.

Lester and production designer Tony Walton read Jérôme Carcopino’s *Daily Life in Ancient Rome* instead of Plautus. Whatever its historical quality, Carcopino’s book attempted to describe “real” life in Rome, the gritty texture of daily life in the ancient metropolis. Lester wanted to undermine Hollywood’s Rome of gleaming marble palaces, magnificent monuments and lavish spectacles. Carcopino helped Lester and Walton create what they hoped was an ‘authentic’ Roman urban landscape—a decaying, rather squalid and smelly back street in Rome. The magnificently gaudy and tacky decor of the Roman houses was carefully planned. The house of Lycus, the seller of courtesans, was painted in “awful purple,” and hideous cherubs and urns cluttered the rooms where the eunuchs massage the girls. According to Lester, “We tried as hard as we could to create bad taste—bad Roman taste of the

first century AD. It's about the back streets, the suburbia of Rome and it has a very nouveau riche quality" (*New York Times*, November 7, 1965).

In his attempt to create an "anti-epic," Lester added a number of scenes that are not part of the original Broadway production but rather serve to parody the cinematic spectacles of 1950s Hollywood epics set in ancient Rome: the chariot races, orgies, bath scenes, and gladiatorial combats. These films, produced during the Cold War era, reflect that era's concerns and anxieties. On the narrative level, Romans signify the oppressive tyranny, figured in the films as modern totalitarianism, and Christians, Jews, and slaves are Us. In most of these epics, Judeo-Christian values triumph over oppressive Romans (and, correspondingly, Nazis, fascists, and communists). *Funny Thing* comically subverts these heavy moralizing Roman epics, especially *Quo Vadis*, *Ben-Hur*, and *Spartacus*, by parodying the spectacles that were mandatory in Hollywood's representations of the grandeur and decadence of ancient Rome.

The arrival of the soldier Miles Gloriosus, for example, mocks the Roman triumphs familiar to audiences who had seen *Quo Vadis* or other epics. Instead of triumphal pomp and circumstance, an off-key fanfare announces Miles' arrival, and the soldiers are pelted with garbage as they march behind their leader, tripping over their drums. Full of self-importance, Miles demands his bride in the song "Bring Me My Bride"; he is in a hurry, for "there are lands to conquer, cities to loot, and people to degrade." He is fabulously vain ("I am my ideal"); and when he arrives at Lycus' house to fetch his bride, he orders "a sit-down orgy for 40" and pompously dictates his Caesar-like memoirs as a comic orgy goes on around him. Ken Thorne's orchestral arrangements contribute to the undermining of the historical epic: his mock-fanfares and orgy music parody the epic methods of *Spartacus*' composer Alex North.

Lester also stages a send-up of a chariot race, alluding to cinema's most famous chariot race in *Ben-Hur*. Lester dressed Miles and his soldiers in black like the evil Messala in *Ben-Hur* and, as in *Ben-Hur*, there are close-up shots of the spokes and

wheels of the chariots rubbing together and becoming entangled. Finally, Lester parodies gladiatorial training and combat in a scene where a bored professional gladiatorial trainer instructs gladiators on how to improve their strokes by using the heads of slaves as if they were golf-balls. Lester's target is the famous scene in *Spartacus* where Spartacus (Kirk Douglas) and other slaves train as gladiators at a school in Roman Capua. Lester follows this parody of gladiatorial training with a parodic combat: Pseudolus (Zero Mostel) enters the arena with a net and trident but must be saved by one of the courtesans, who successfully aims a trident at Pseudolus' opponent, mocking the gladiatorial matches found in nearly every Roman epic film.

In his satire of the Hollywood epic and its representations of the Roman world, Lester was likely influenced by British comedy, especially the *Carry On* films popular in England since the late 1950s, a series which parodied a variety of film genres. *Carry On Spying* satirized the spythriller, *Carry on Cowboy* the western, *Carry On Up the Khyber* the British Raj epic. *Carry On Cleo*, released in 1964, took aim at the Hollywood Roman epic in general and Joseph Mankiewicz's recently released *Cleopatra* in particular. Lester had moved to London in the mid-1960s, and his film was really an Anglo-American co-production, a triangular meeting of the comic sensibilities of Rome, Brooklyn, and Brighton. British screenwriter Michael Pertwee collaborated with producer Melvin Frank on the script, a number of the cast were British character actors, cinematography was by Nicolas Roeg, and artistic design was by Tony Walton. The manic, zany quality of the British *Carry On* satires of film genres seems to have worked its way into Lester's film. Like *Carry On Cleo*, many of the jokes in Lester's film come from a parodic representation of a past and distant empire (Rome) and from a parody of Hollywood's appropriation of that empire to inscribe modern imperial myths.

Lester's film offered American audiences comic relief from popular images of Rome and Romans in American culture. Most Americans have a double image of Rome—the "good"

Rome, the Roman republic and the “bad” Rome, the Roman Empire. The film, like the original Broadway musical-comedy, punctures the image of the ‘noble Romans’ of the Republic, those togaed figures of fortitude, self-denial, and patriotism that used to crop up with great regularity in civics lessons, political discourse, and the arts. Critic Hollis Alpert noted with pleasure that “the comic corruption on all levels of Roman society is a welcome corrective to those noble Romans who have infested movies for generations” (*Saturday Review*, October, 15 1966). And according to *Variety*, “One of *Funny Thing*’s great services is that it satirizes a ‘film-myth’ culture, the Romans, too long burdened under the homogenized and idealized unreality of laundered togas and gleaming columns” (September 27, 1966). Lester’s film also deflates the myth of the grandeur and decadence of imperial Rome, a myth the Hollywood film industry helped to disseminate in American culture. This is not the corrupt Rome of mad emperors like Nero, and Romans are not the decadent oppressors of Christians and slaves. Instead of Hollywood spectacles of armies on the march, monumental white marble palaces, depraved imperial elites, and bread and circuses, Lester’s Romans have dirty togas; the columns and friezes of his Roman houses are chipped; and his Roman streets are full of rotting vegetables, toiling proles, and worn-out slaves.

It is ironic, however, given Lester’s twin goals, that he realized them by utilizing the imperial resources of Hollywood, including its established economy of production, and especially by using sets built for other epics. Lester explained that his film was made in Spain in part because the props of Antony Mann’s *The Fall of the Roman Empire* were still there and because of the familiarity of the Spaniards with what Hollywood wanted: “The stage hands know not to put forks on a table. The horses are trained. There’s a general familiarity with these types of films.”

To create Carcopino’s real Rome, Lester recycled some of Hollywood’s sets and exploited an already established economic relationship between Spanish peasants and Hollywood directors. “I became very interested in the sordid quality of

Rome and started reading Carcopino and examining life and behavior in Rome from a historical point of view and so built the set, filled it with vegetables and fruit and left them to rot for two weeks so that all the flies and wasps got into it. I brought peasants down from the hills and little villages in the center of Spain and made them live in the sets. We gave them each a particular job, sharpening knives, making pottery . . . We just left them to do a specific job for the whole film. I liked all that and was getting involved in it.” Lester attempted to undermine Hollywood’s representations of Rome and its distortions of history by creating a more authentic “sordid” Rome, but he did not escape Hollywood’s influence: he depended on the economic power of Hollywood to command resources and labor.

When *Funny Thing* premiered in 1966, United Artists staged a promotional chariot race. The starting gate was at Caesars Palace, Las Vegas, and the finish line was at the Fine Arts Theater in Los Angeles, where the film opened. Caesars Palace’s designers relied heavily on Hollywood’s representations of Roman decadence and excess in erecting a temple dedicated to indulgence and excess in the deserts of Nevada, and it was therefore fitting that the two epicenters of popular images of the Roman world collaborate in promoting a film about Rome. In what must have seemed a final irony to Lester, Hollywood’s promotional stunt for his adaptation of a Rome imagined by second-generation Jewish immigrants, an adaptation Lester hoped would critique celluloid visions of antiquity, was held at a faux Roman pleasure palace where patrons could star in their own Hollywood-inspired Roman fantasy.

NOTE

This essay is a shortened version of “Brooklyn-on-the-Tiber: Roman Comedy on Broadway and in Film,” which will appear in *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture*, Sandra R. Joshel, Margaret Malamud, and Donald T. McGuire, Jr., eds. (The Johns Hopkins University Press 2001). Reprinted with permission of The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Key sources of quotations come from Larry Gelbart’s autobiography, *Laugh-*

*ing Matters: On Writing M*A*S*H, Tootsie, Oh God! and a Few Other Funny Things* (New York 1998), and from Myrna Katz Frommer and Harvey Frommer's oral history of the Catskills, *It Happened in the Catskills: An Oral History in the Words of Busboys, Bellhops, Guests, Proprietors, Comedians, Agents, and Others Who Lived It* (San Diego, New York, and London 1991).