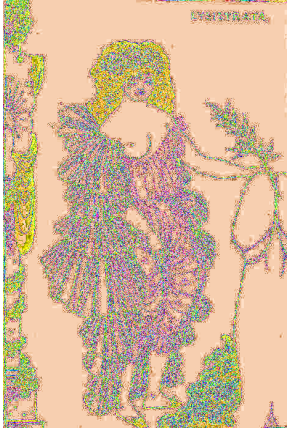


Aristophanes'

Lysistrata

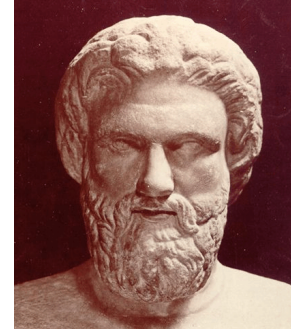


A Playgoer's Guide

The Author: Aristophanes

Aristophanes (448-380 BC) was a Greek comedic dramatist. His home was the deme of Cydathenaeum, but had some "connections" with the island of Aegina and the great philosophers, Socrates and Plato. In total, Aristophanes wrote forty-four comedies of which only eleven have been tracked through history. His first play was put on the stage in B.C. 427. The writing of Aristophanes is referred to as "old comedy." His writing mocked the authorities of his time and touched upon several large and controversial political issues. Personally, Aristophanes lobbied against the civil war in Greece and fought for the rights of society's lower classes as he was a strong believer in "the old democracy" of Athens.

He was constantly in trouble for his plays and was threatened by Cleon, a very powerful politician, on several occasions. Aristophanes' plays poked fun at King Cleon and Athens; therefore, he was charged with "slandering the Athenian people and state" – an offence that was punishable by being sold into slavery. Aristophanes is said to have died between 386 and 380 and was survived by his son Araros and his brother Philippus, who both later became comic dramatists in their own right.



The Background: Greek Theatre

Greek theatre is a theatrical tradition that flourished in Ancient Greece between 600 and 200 BC. The city-state of Athens, the political and military power in Greece during this period, was the epicenter of Ancient Greek theatre. Athenian tragedy, comedy, and satyr plays were some of the earliest theatrical forms to emerge in the world. The traditional structure of the Greek theatre is often debated, but generally, the performing took place in the orchestra, or dancing circle. There was often some sort of structure that allowed actors to act on different levels, which allowed the playgoers to see and hear the plays clearly. The audience surrounded this area of hard packed earth on three sides. The seats were built into the ground in upward slopes. The larger theatres held up to 14,000 people. Smaller ones, built in later years, could seat as few as 200.



GROUND PLAN OF A GREEK THEATRE

The Play: The *Lysistrata*

Greece is torn apart by the war between the Athenians and Spartans. One woman, Lysistrata, steps up to save her home. She calls together the women from different nations. They reflect on the fact that their husbands are forever gone off in battle, and they are left at home to wait and worry. Lysistrata has decided that she's had enough of the war, and so, with her women, they put into action her plan. The women take over the Acropolis, which is where the money is held. The men, therefore have no more money to pay for the war. The women, though, will not be satisfied until the men have all agreed to peace. To get their attention the women dress in ways to make themselves very attractive to the men. They then refuse to let the men be satisfied, and refuse to be taken to bed. The men attempt to overcome the army of women, but who is stronger willed: the men or the women?

The Character: Lysistrata

Lysistrata, whose name means "liquidator of armies," is believed by some to be based on Aspasia, companion to the leader of Athens, Pericles. Because she was a courtesan she was not permitted to marry him. She is asserted to have actually been a *hetaira* (sexual partner, companion and better educated than other Greek women so that they can converse with intelligent and sophisticated men). She was considered to be "the" most beautiful of the city's *hetairai*. She entertained the most powerful men in Athens at her dinner parties (without their wives). Her house became a fashionable place for the elite of Athens' to frequent. Pericles moved in with her as soon as he met her, possibly divorcing his wife to make it possible, and lived as her husband, although their marriage was forbidden by city laws, until he died of the plague. He was often criticized for this relationship, partly because he relied on her help in judgement. Women were not normally politically involved or active in Athens at the time.

The Theme: Anti-war Women

Lysistrata has been used on various occasions as a public outcry against war. In 1930, it was revived in New York City for a run of several months. In 1960 it inspired an opera, *Lysistrata and the War*, which was performed by the Wayne State University opera workshop as an effort to protest the Vietnam War. The most recent anti-war effort the play has been used for occurred on March 3rd, 2003. On this date, as reported, surprisingly, in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, "amateur and professional actors around the world presented roughly 1000 readings to protest the imminent war in Iraq." This worldwide presentation spanned 59 countries from China to Argentina; the United States saw 700, with 67 in New York alone. These public readings of the play took place in locations ranging from coffee houses to outdoor theatres and, according to feminist writer Katha Pollitt, writing in *The Nation*, "on the subway, at Grand Central Station, in bars, libraries and bookstores . . . at the Barnard College cafeteria, where students offered a high-spirited all-girl reading, complete with balloon phalluses, to their lunching classmates. That night, I saw the all-star version at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, which offered gymnasts, bongo drums, a band and yet more phallic balloons, and featured, among others, Kathleen Chalfant, Kevin Bacon (!) and an unforgettable Mercedes Ruehl as the witty and redoubtable heroine."

This guide was researched by
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From the Page to the Stage
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