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Siskelus and Ebertium

By Adam Mallinger

The scene is a darkened balcony of a theater. As the lights come up, two figures are revealed sitting in the seats. They are renowned Great Book critics GENITO SISKELUS and ROGERNICIES EBERTIUM, of The Roman Tribune and The Athenian Sun-Times, respectively.

EBERTIUM. Good evening and welcome to a special edition of "Siskelus & Ebertium." This week we will be discussing the differences between Greek and Roman comedies, examining the familiar conventions of both.

SISKELUS. Actually, Rogernicies, we're only comparing at the comedies of the Roman playwright Plautus and the Greek Aristophanes.

EBERTIUM. In my mind, there is no comparison, Genito. Aristophanes' *The Clouds* and *Lysistrata* are well-crafted works of art. His comedies are social commentaries on Greek life. Plautus' plays read like spec scripts for *Three's Company*. *The Braggart Soldier* and *The Brothers Menaechmus* don't even try to rise above hackneyed plots and lowbrow humor.

SISKELUS. I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to back that up, Rogernicies.

EBERTIUM. Gladly. For starters, *The Clouds* features the character of Sokrates and in part seems to be a commentary on the accusations

that the real-life Sokrates corrupted the youth of Athens. Strepsiades is bogged down with debt and decides to send his son, Pheidippides, off to be a pupil of Sokrates. He hopes that Pheidippides will learn enough about the Sokratic method to be able to work out a solution to his debts.

SISKELUS. You mean fast-talk his way out of debt, don't you?

EBERTIUM. In a manner of speaking, I suppose, but that really is the point of the play. In Sokrates' world, truth is subjective so long as one can justify it. All one needs to do to win an argument is present the better case. Much of the humor arises from Sokrates' unique view on life, such as the scene where he tries to convince Strepsiades that Zeus does not exist. Quite logically, he argues the science of convection rather than a god is responsible for rain and thunder..

SISKELUS. As I recall, that scene also draws a comparison between thunder and farting.

EBERTIUM. Well...yes, but....

SISKELUS. In fact, I daresay Aristophanes has an unhealthy preoccupation with bodily functions. The play has a generous helping of crude humor. A discussion about the distance a flea can leap quickly leads to a description of flea farting, and that's not the only fart joke present. Plus we have the lizard-crapping reference, the threat of a radish being shoved into a rectum, and don't forget about the erection joke...

EBERTIUM. You've made your point, and I still think you're missing the forest for the trees. The heart of this play is the

relationship between father and son and how their encounter with Sokrates affects that. Yes, there is crude humor, but the better humor is character based and rises out of the characters' reactions to situations.

SISKELUS. Then can you tell me just what Aristophanes is trying to say? Is he endorsing or condemning Sokrates? At the end of the play, Pheidippes physically abuses his father and is able to justify it using the Sokratic Method. Strepsiades even concedes that under that logic, he deserves the beating. Now what sort of message does that send? The logical conclusion would be a condemnation of Sokrates' logic, but it's hard to back that up when Sokrates is the most sympathetic and reasonable person in the play.

EBERTIUM. I don't follow.

SISKELUS. I'll speak slower. If Aristophanes is endorsing Sokrates, then in effect, he is saying it is acceptable for children to abuse their parents. If he is trying to condemn the Sokratic Method, he fails because there is no character to strongly represent an opposing viewpoint. Sokrates is presented as the teacher to both the audience and the characters. It's like writing a play that has a genocidal madman as the lead character and his views are never stated as wrong.

EBERTIUM. I think the fight scene is intended to be funny and you're taking it too seriously. But it's good you're asking these questions because I think that's exactly what Aristophanes wanted you to do. This is a

play that forces you to think about it afterwards. Is Sokrates right? Is he wrong? With the Sokratic method, there is no "true" answer. The viewer gets to decide. It's brilliant! Comedy with deeper social underpinnings!

SISKELUS. Then it doesn't bother you that the writer appears not to know what the point of his own work is?

EBERTIUM.well...at least this play tried to be about something. Can you honestly tell me you found depth in *The Braggart Soldier* and *The Brothers Menaechmus*?

SISKELUS. More than I found in *Lysistrata*. I thought that the humor in *Lysistrata* was broad and played off the stereotype that men are ruled by their penis...uh...penises...penisi?

EBERTIUM. I'll grant you that there were a lot of sex-based jokes, but the women are just as affected by the sex strike. They desire sex too. The point is made that men and women need each other to be complete. Everyone desires love and companionship. Aristophanes demonstrates that by playing off the familiar stereotype of men as sex crazed pigs. The difference between Aristophanes and Plautus is that Aristophanes writes as if he is aware the audience knows the familiar cliches. I'll say it again: Greek plays demonstrate more depth than their Roman counterparts, speaking more to social concerns than silly contrivances.

SISKELUS. I'd have to agree this is the main difference between Greek and Roman

comedy. Even though Plautus looked to the Greeks for inspiration, his work is not as reflective of contemporary events and people as Aristophanes' plays. His dialogue is much more natural too. Characters have shorter speeches rather than monologues that go on for several pages. It feels so much truer to life.

EBERTIUM. I don't go to plays to see real life. I go to be entertained, to be stimulated.

SISKELUS. And I for one wasn't upset by the absence of the Chorus in *The Braggart Soldier* or *The Brothers Menaechmus*. Once it was an original idea, but now it's a hackneyed device that has long since worn out its welcome.

EBERTIUM. Not that it makes a difference that there is no Chorus. In both of his plays, Plautus has characters directly address the audience, which gets old quickly.

SISKELUS. You didn't mind when Aristophanes spoke to the audience in *The Clouds*.

EBERTIUM. That dialogue served a purpose. As a playwright, Aristophanes was assuring his audience that the play wouldn't have recycled plots, fantastical situations or silly slapstick.

SISKELUS. Only he had no problem with the fart jokes. Personally, I found Aristophanes' speech a self-indulgent way of attacking other playwrights. It should be unnecessary. If a playwright needs to directly tell me what is in the play, then he didn't do his job well when he actually depicted the events.

EBERTIUM. May I remind you of how many times Plautus had his characters painstakingly detail each step of their schemes in *The Braggart Soldier*?

SISKELUS. In that case, it was only so the audience would be able to understand the events as they happened, rather than be confused by the multitude of details.

EBERTIUM. But it makes for a very predictable plot. That's taking a pretty big risk when you already have a script as hackneyed as *The Braggart Soldier* or *The Brothers Menaechmus*. One play expects us to believe that Sceledrus doesn't realize that the "twin" sisters are actually the same woman and the other tries to convince us that Menaechmus II is incapable of figuring out people are confusing him with his twin. This last example makes no sense as the entire reason he is in Epidamnus is to find his twin. You'd think eventually Menaechmus would get the hint, maybe after the third or fourth such incident.

SISKELUS. Rogernicies, a strong part of the joke is that the audience knows something the character doesn't. It helps build comic tension.

EBERTIUM. But that tension is totally deflated by the time the joke is told the third time. The only purpose the joke serves then is to make Menaechmus II look completely dense. Put the whip away, Plautus. The pony's dead. The repetition of the same joke over and over again felt like a bad sketch from that comedy show that performs live each week on Saturday night.

SISKELUS. Did you at least find the joke funny the first time?

EBERTIUM. As long as I pretended I didn't see it coming from a mile away, yes, a little. The problem here is that Plautus treats his characters *as* jokes rather than means to a joke.

SISKELUS. I'm not sure I understand.

EBERTIUM. Aristophanes treats his characters like real people. They're a bit more three-dimensional and then seem to undergo some character development over the course of the play. Witness Pheidippides development in *The Clouds* from a playboy to a master of Sokratic logic. Plautus' characters rarely develop. They're put in difficult situations and have to wriggle their way out. And most infuriating is that fact that the problems would be solved a lot faster if his characters weren't total numbskulls! It's bad writing if you need your characters to be idiots to further the plot. If every character wasn't this dumb, I might overlook it, but Plautus takes the joke too far.

SISKELUS. We're running long on time, so why don't we go right to our closing remarks?

EBERTIUM. After you.

SISKELUS. Well, I think we can agree that Greek and Roman comedies have very different approaches to humor. The Romans are noteworthy for their attention to complicated situations within simple plots and characters....

EBERTIUM. ...while the Greeks aim for a higher level of humor. The comedies are a way of poking fun at contemporary Greece and Aristophanes crafts his characters with care. This allows the humor to be more character-based than contrivance-based. The situations in Roman comedies are contrived so that every plebian in the audience gets the joke hammered home, and that short changes the intelligence of the rest of the viewers.

SISKELUS. Though the Greeks are not without their indulgence in crude humor...

EBERTIUM. ...which is still more intelligent than bad puns in Roman comedy. In short, if you're looking for intelligent comedy with character development and a plot that will keep you thinking long after you've left the theater, head to the nearest Aristophanes production.

SISKELUS. And if you can put aside your pretensions for one night and are just looking to laugh, go see Plautus. I'm Genito Siskelus....

EBERTIUM. ...and I'm Rogernicies Ebertium and until next week, the balcony's closed.