

Performing Plautus' *Rudens* in the Roman Forum

In my paper I will examine the implications of performing Plautus' *Rudens* in the Roman Forum near the shrine of Venus Cloacina and the effect that such a performance could have had on the audience as simultaneous spectators of urban architecture, religious ritual and Roman drama. Rush Rehm says that the religious festivals of Greece and Rome, through their engagement with city topography, activated the potential symbolism of the landscape, like an electric current (2007:185). This is also true of the plays performed during these festivals. Unfortunately, when it comes to understanding how the comedies of Plautus interacted with the time and location of their performance, there are many possibilities but few certainties, due to the general lack of didaskalic information about the performances. If, however, one is willing to speculate about the effect of certain plays performed at known venues—such as the Forum— and on known occasions—such as the *ludi plebei*—connections become apparent that can enrich the interpretation of the play in question.

A performance of *Rudens* near the shrine of Venus Cloacina, whether it was the premier or a subsequent performance, would be enriched by both the imagery of the shrine and the connections to rituals and myths associated with that particular location. The Forum has long been recognized as a site for temporary festival venues, and, as Moore (1998:137) and Marshall (2006:31-48) both point out, only a part of the Forum would be used for the temporary stage and seating. The shrine of Venus Cloacina is in the middle of the Forum, on the northern side, just west of what was then the path of the Cloaca Maxima. Since a shrine and altar of Venus are essential to the plot of *Rudens*, a performance near an actual shrine of Venus would allow the play to be performed in front of the deity in question (Hanson 1959; Cic. *de Resp. Harsup.* 24). A stage could be set up in front of the shrine, similar to the stage proposed by Goldberg (1998) for the *ludi Megalenses* in front of the temple of Magna Mater, with preexisting viewing areas

available on the balconies (*maeaniae*) of the *tabernae novae* on the north side of the forum and from the nearby Atrium Regium (Vitruvius 5.1.2; Welch 2003). The visual appearance of the shrine itself, with its twin statues flanking an altar (see *RRC* 494.42-3), would allow the shrine to provide a visual double for a number of tableaux in the play, including the moment when the young women seek sanctuary at the altar and when the slave Gripus instructs the pimp Labrax to swear an oath while touching the altar. Moreover, the two competing depictions of the goddess Venus visible in the statues would also enrich the uncertainty regarding the status of the heroine Palaestra, who is rescued from a life of prostitution on Sicily by recognition and marriage. The shrine's connection to rituals of liminality and purification would have reinforced the liminality of the play's setting and of its female protagonist. Furthermore, associations of this shrine with the story of the death of Verginia (Livy 3.48) could have cast a performance of *Rudens* at this site as a comic inversion of a serious story of a young woman whose chastity was threatened, a story that may even have been the subject of a *fabula praetexta* (Wiseman 1998:1-18). Given the conflict between the patricians and plebeians in the tale of Verginia, the annual *ludi plebei* would have been an ideal occasion for highlighting the inherent connections between her story and that of Palaestra through a performance of *Rudens* at the shrine of Cloacina. Though such a performance must remain hypothetical, this exercise nevertheless illustrates the rich network of connections available to spectators as they viewed Plautine comedy within its religious, architectural and mytho-historical context.

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