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NONVERBAL BEHAVIOUR ON THE ROMAN COMIC STAGE

Costas Panayotakis

‘oratori minime convenit distortus vultus gestusque, quae in mimis rideri solent.’

Quint. 6.3.29

Acting, especially comic acting, is, and always has been, inseparable from patterns of nonverbal behaviour. Evocative gestures, meaningful postures, complete immobility, telling facial expressions, “pregnant” pauses, nonverbal sounds, and expressive modulations of voice are some of the means comic actors use nowadays to embellish their lines and signal to fellow stage-characters and the audience their thoughts, feelings, and attitudes about people or issues that may form part of a play’s plot. In some cases, nonverbal behaviour may replace speech and be used as a source of laughter on its own; or it may be exploited to corroborate the effect of a verbal joke and to form part of a comic scene. Are generalisations like these valid for the acting practices of the Roman comic theatre in the Republic and the early Empire? If they are, how would this contribute to our understanding of the individualism of the extant Roman comic playwrights, and the mechanisms by which they created humour? This paper is not meant to be an essay on Roman acting, but a reminder of the pitfalls associated with tracing signs of nonverbal behaviour in Roman comedy and mime. My aim is threefold. First, to consider the reliability and assess the value of our evidence on this subject. Second, to suggest fruitful lines of enquiry in this fascinating, yet insufficiently researched scholarly field. Third, to show that, although nonverbal behaviour was considered almost as important for the success of a *fabula palliata* as the actual script, its function was really to reinforce the dramatic context to which it belonged, and not to replace or upstage the words of the actors.

Gestures and body language, in general, seems to have played an important part in the performance of what we regard as the carefully composed scripts of individual Roman comic playwrights, at least from the time of Plautus.¹ This topic has never been comprehensively examined in a monograph,² but appears regularly in the form of scattered observations found in

recent commentaries on Plautine and Terentian plays that are examined as scripts intended for live performance (as opposed to, say, recitation or silent reading, both of which, however, should also be perceived as ‘performative’ actions). The incorporation of such issues of performance-criticism in literary studies and commentaries on the comedies of Plautus and Terence comes as a refreshing and welcome shift in scholarship on Roman drama, the majority of which has sadly been dominated for decades by the quest for identifying passages that do not go back to the Greek original at the expense of the assessment of the plays on their own merit.³ One of the consequences of this scholarly neglect is that so far histrionic nonverbal behaviour has been treated mainly in relation to the study of the influence of acting on Roman rhetoric. But the contributions are of varied scholarly value, and do not systematically demonstrate how to approach the extant Roman comedies in order to draw a fuller picture of Roman acting techniques that may have been employed in the plays of different playwrights. More to the point, Roman comedies were not exercises in rhetorical skill, but written in order to be seen at a large theatre in front of a live audience, whose attention often needed to be engaged.

Studying nonverbal behaviour in Roman comedy entails making many assumptions about Roman acting, not all of which can be corroborated by visual or literary evidence. In fact, even in the field of verbal behaviour we cannot confidently claim to be sure about basic issues regarding an actor’s delivery; for instance, we are far from certain as to how the Romans of Plautus’ or Terence’s eras pronounced their own language, let alone how they expressed irony or sarcasm or even a simple question with it.⁴ In spite of all this uncertainty, it would be unwise to believe that Roman actors were expected to recite their lines *without* any modulation in their voice or any movement in their body to suit the context of the scene they were enacting. This may be inferred firstly from Quintilian’s amusing account of the repertoire and favourite gestures of the comic actors Demetrius and Stratocles, and secondly from his constant remarks on issues relating to the voice and the gait to which an actor ought to pay attention if he wanted to act successfully and win the audience’s applause. Demetrius, who specialized, according to Quintilian (11.3.178), in

portraying ‘gods, young men, good fathers, slaves, matrons, and respectable old women’ (‘*deos et iuvenes et bonos patres servosque et matronas et graves anus*’), shook his hands in a particular fashion and was renowned for both ‘the skill with which he would make his dress seem to puff out with wind as he walked, and the expressive movements of the right side which he sometimes introduced with effect’ (Loeb translation; ‘*ingrediendo ventum concipere veste et nonnumquam dextro latere facere gestus*’). On the other hand, Stratocles was at his best when he played the roles of sharp-tempered old men, parasites, pimps, and similar lively characters (‘*acres senes, callidos servos, parasitos, lenones et omnia agitatoria*’, Quint. 11.3.178). Quintilian (11.3.180) singles out ‘his nimbleness and rapidity of movement, his laugh (which, though not always in keeping with the character he represented, he deliberately employed to awaken answering laughter in the audience), and finally, even, the way in which he sank his neck into his shoulders’ (Loeb translation; ‘*cursus et agilitas et vel parum conveniens personae risus, quem non ignarus rationis populo dabat, et contracta etiam cervicula*’). Quintilian stresses that these gestures should not be considered transferable skills used by either actor, but were tricks created by and unique to each of these persons (11.3.180).

Moreover, he tells his audience that an actor ought to adapt his voice to the part he is performing (1.11.1, 11.3.91) and to the content of his speech (1.11.2); an actor’s utterance must have modulations (11.3.57), while his gait must be appropriate to his role (11.3.111-2). When drawing the image of the proper orator, he offers a lengthy and theatrically inspired account of gestures meant to be used for the following parts of the body: head (11.3.65 ff.), glance (11.3.72 ff.), eyes (11.3.75 ff.), eyebrows (11.3.78 ff.), lips and nostrils (11.3.80 ff.), neck (11.3.82 ff.), shoulders (11.3.83-4), hands (11.3.85 ff.), fingers (11.3.92 ff.) and feet (11.3.124 ff.). It seems, then, fair to suppose that actors, generally speaking, took care of the visual part of their performance, and that the audience diligently noticed and criticised any mistakes or deficiencies in their gestures. Quintilian gives us also the impression (11.3.112; cf. 11.3.71) that, at least in New Comedy, each character had his or her manner of moving, while the distinction between

different postures and different characters not only could become a source of laughter but also informed the members of the audience about the category and nature of the theatrical type they had in front of them.⁵

Gesticulation, we are led to believe, was equally important in the Roman mime, which is said to have been a dramatic representation of, usually, low life; this sub-literary genre, which, according to the grammarian Diomedes, put special emphasis on the imitation of irreverent movements (*Art. Gramm.* III, p. 491 Kiel),⁶ should be particularly interesting to those who work on nonverbal behaviour; this is so, because mime is allegedly the only theatrical form of entertainment whose actors and actresses performed without masks.⁷ So, Cicero (*De Orat.* 2.251-2) singles out emphasis on mimicry and exaggerated facial expressions as two of the characteristics of mimic wit, while Isidore's reference to 'the movement of the body' (*Orig.* 18.49) as a fundamental characteristic of the mimic theatre shows the importance of body-language as a valuable source of comic effect in these farcical plays. However, although orators and grammarians alike are at pains to demonstrate that mime employed facial expressions and bodily movements more than other forms of comedy did, we really know very little about specific examples of nonverbal behaviour in this genre; both the fragmentary state of the extant Roman mimes and the improvisational nature of Roman drama, a consideration to which I will return, militate against any attempt to trace such concrete evidence.⁸

Were there ancient handbooks on acting? One wonders if the treatise that the greatly admired Roscius is said to have written on the relationship between acting and eloquence (*Macr.* 3.14.2) would have included such information.⁹ Moreover, would the teachers of acting (*scaenici doctores*), to whom Quintilian refers (11.3.71), have provided their pupils with written instructions? The lack of such evidence and the almost complete absence in theatrical texts of what we would now term explicit stage-directions,¹⁰ have led researchers on nonverbal behaviour and recent commentators of Plautine and Terentian comedies to formulate speculative views on the reconstruction of comic stage-business; evidence for the nonverbal expression of stage-

characters is, consequently, being sought in a wide variety of non-theatrical sources. These include visual material demonstrating theatrical scenes, such as the Dioscurides mosaics¹¹ and the illustrated MSS of Terence,¹² non-dramatic literary texts that are purported to have been heavily influenced by drama (for instance, Petronius' *Satyrical*),¹³ the imaginative commentary on Terence of the late antique grammarian Aelius Donatus,¹⁴ and the educational instructions that Cicero and Quintilian left to their students; with these instructions they urged them to abstain from facial expressions and gestures they defined as histrionic, because these could ruin their image of the decent orator and prove fatal to the result of their delivery in court.¹⁵

This approach has yielded very interesting results, which, however, are potentially misleading. Consider, for instance, in the mosaic that is thought to represent the opening scene of Menander's *Synaristosae*, later used by Plautus as a model for his *Cistellaria*, the manner in which the unhappy courtesan Selenium is anxiously fiddling with her garment, or the careless fashion in which the drunken bawd is holding her drinking-cup.¹⁶ Such expressive details do not prove anything concrete about Hellenistic or Roman acting, but demonstrate how imaginative and subtle ancient artists were required to be when commissioned to depict dramatic scenes. Likewise, Petronius' predilection for associating reactions of the characters of his novel with the comic stage may be thought to give us a glimpse into the field of low acting techniques; but these should be treated with caution. Especially revealing, for example, is the case of the exaggerated laughter of the priestess Quartilla, which the terrified narrator Encolpius, in Petr. *Sat.* 19.1, describes as *mimico risu*; all we can ultimately do with such references is to compile a list of vague allusions to nonverbal behaviour which are defined by non-dramatists as 'theatrical', and which, frankly, should best be interpreted in their immediate, non-dramatic context. Thus, in the above-mentioned case the narrator Encolpius is reshaping his earlier lewd experiences at the hands of the orgiastic Quartilla, and he chooses to do this by structuring his account after the Roman mime, which was a sub-literary genre that would be appropriate as a narrative vehicle of low adventures. This interpretation might suggest that this passage is *good* evidence for the mime,

and that, consequently, we need not be cautious about it. But *mimico risu* does not actually tell us anything about mimic techniques; the function of the adjective *mimicus* here is to reinforce the notions of falsehood and deception, both of which are an integral part not only of Quartilla's behaviour but also of the world of the *Satyrice*.¹⁷

Three centuries later than Petronius, in his short notes on the plays of Terence, Donatus not only comments on linguistic issues and occasionally compares the Latin text with its Greek original, but also rightly encourages his intended audience to visualise what they were reading. When, for instance, in Terence's *Eunuchus* the courtesan Thais, in urging her beloved Phaedria to forget that she had not allowed him to visit her on the previous day, uses the words 'missa haec face' (90), the grammarian compliments the reader who imagines that, when this sentence was uttered, it was accompanied by two examples of nonverbal behaviour, laughter and a kiss ('Bene intelligit qui hoc a meretrice ridente molliter et osculum porrigente dici accipit'). Later on, when Thais begs Phaedria not to torment himself with the thought of Thraso, his rival for Thais' affection (95), Donatus notes that this statement of hers would have been unconvincing if she had not made it jointly with some gesture showing that she, too, was suffering alongside with him ('Haec rursum nisi amplectens adulescentem mulier dixerit, videbitur "ne crucia te" sine affectu dicere, sed sic dicit "ne crucia te" et eo gestu, quasi in eo et ipsa crucietur'). Donatus may not have seen performances of Terence's *Eunuchus*, but his remarks make sense in their theatrical context; on the whole, however, they demonstrate not how actors acted in the early Republic, but how deeply rhetoric and declamation permeated Donatus' thinking.

The collection of instances of nonverbal behaviour that Roman orators regard as inappropriate for the ideal orator because of their 'theatrical' nature, is useful in so far as it enables us to label some gestures as 'histrionic'. The distinction – according to Cicero – between rhetorical and theatrical delivery lies in that a rhetorical gesture 'explains the entire topic and meaning by signifying, not by demonstrating', whereas a theatrical gesture 'expresses single words'.¹⁸ On this principle, certain gestures were identified as unacceptable for the stage of public speaking: for

example, the movement of the head alone to indicate – among other things – consent, refusal and affirmation (Quint. 11.3.71), or the elevation and contraction of the shoulders which was seen as a ‘gestus servilis’ (Quint. 11.3.83), or clapping the hands and beating the chest – actions defined as theatrical tricks, *scaenicum* (Quint. 11.3.123). It would be interesting to know whether Quintilian defines these gestures as theatrical because he has actually seen them performed on stage, or because his experience as theatre-goer has taught him to consider them worthy of being made on stage. To this category belong also isolated references to acting techniques derived from authors such as Seneca the Younger, who wrote that stage-artists (*artifices scaenici* – does he mean comedy-actors or pantomime-dancers?) expressed bashfulness by lowering their head and fixing their gaze to the ground, or compared the eccentric way in which Maecenas presented himself in public to the posture of a fugitive slave in a mime.¹⁹ But, on the whole, these remarks allow us to observe mainly how vital it was for the Roman male citizen with political ambitions to act in public within the acceptable social norms. More importantly, they fail to prove that, whenever the plot of a play (or of different plays) called for expressions of, say, fear or joy, it was the *same* gestures or postures or (in the case of mime) facial expressions that were systematically exploited either by the same actor or by different actors to express fear or joy.

For instance, even if we concur with the highly disputed view that the source of the bizarre drawings in Terence’s illustrated manuscripts can ultimately be traced back to the second century BCE, I am not inclined to accept that the bodily postures and the elaborate gestures made by the hands of these miniature-characters are faithfully representing general theatrical practice of Terence’s time. For I do not believe that, in Roman acting technique, or, in fact, in the acting technique of any period in antiquity, there existed a rigidly drawn and precisely defined repertory of gestures and stage-movements, which were associated with a specific emotional state, and which dictated to a comic actor how to act with the different parts of his body at any given time during his or her role. Nor would I like to claim that there was only *one* style of comic acting (whatever this may have been), which applied to *all* types of Roman theatrical entertainment, and

which was adopted by *all* comic actors. For example, theatrical space is one factor that conditions histrionic gestures, and so a mime-actor would have gesticulated differently when performing in a small street than when acting in a large theatre. In this respect I disagree with scholars who see Roman comic acting as ‘a sort of self-sufficient sign system’, a spectacle-by-numbers, or a set of conventional gesticulations that were taught by teachers of stagecraft, memorised by trainee-actors, and avoided by rhetoricians; these views do not allow for the actor’s originality, improvisation, and spontaneity.²⁰ By this I do not, of course, mean that there never existed gestures and movements which were character-specific or appropriate to role-playing; for example, I would assume that a Roman actor of the *fabula palliata* would have played differently when assuming the role of a parasite than when playing the part of an old woman. That there may have been gestures attached to specific character-types cannot be denied, and may be best illustrated by the line Phormio delivers as he is about to engage in cunning role-play in order to fool the old men Demipho and Chremes: ‘nunc gestu’ mihi voltusque est capiendus novos’ (Ter. *Ph.* 890). Even in this case, however, all Phormio says is that he will have to act *appropriately*; in other words, he is making a distinction between his previous and his future *persona* without implying that he will be employing stock gestures.

Although I cannot ultimately produce any concrete evidence *against* the view that acting in the time of Plautus and Terence was limited to a set of traditional and fixed gestures, it seems to me that this view is implausible because of the subtleties and fluctuations in the portrayal of most of the main Plautine and Terentian characters. In Terence’s *Eunuchus*, for instance, the courtesan Thais is not a typical courtesan, for she combines feelings of genuine affection toward Phaedria (normally displayed by chaste *virgines*) with cruelty and manipulative tenderness toward Thraso (usually associated with greedy and mercenary *meretrices*). I would expect, therefore, the actor playing Thais’ role to vary his gestures according to the context, thus blurring the boundaries between a stock character and the set of gestures that the audience may expect to see on stage in relation to that character.

It has probably become obvious from the order in which I chose to present my evidence so far that I regard the transmitted text as the least unreliable source of information for visualising the stage-action of a comedy or a mime.²¹ I should hasten to add that by the conventional term ‘transmitted text’ I mean the script which has come down to us in the manuscript tradition, and which, though attributed to one person, the ‘playwright’, most probably (and, in some cases, certainly) is the outcome of additions and alterations made by the playwright himself as well as theatre-producers and leading actors of different generations. In other words, I begin by emphasising that, as far as we are concerned, there is no such thing as ‘the playwright’s script’ or ‘the director’s cut’ in Roman drama.²² But to return to my argument: in very few cases are there explicit stage-directions, such as those found in the Greek mime that relates the rescue from the barbarians of the heroine Charition by means of wine and the malodorous farting of the comic slave;²³ even if a transmitted text contains no such details, the playwright (and those who may have revised the script after him) usually provides his actors with a minimum of necessary stage-directions incorporated, more or less subtly, into the body of the play.

This methodology is not unproblematic, either. How can we be certain that some comedies did not include in their performance comic stage-business that was not signalled by the words, but was nonetheless added by the actor(s) as spontaneous jokes intended to make the script funnier?²⁴ And how much rested on the audience’s imagination, guided by a careful playwright, in proportion to what was actually seen and done on the stage itself? My view is that we can never be sure that some highly farcical scenes did *not* include impromptu actions that would have aimed at prolonging the audience’s amusement and increasing the play’s entertainment value. Although I cannot prove that such actions were performed, I cannot reject or exclude the possibility that sometimes comic actors may have performed actions which were not instigated by the script; comedy as a genre is more receptive to such nonverbal material than tragedy (in other words, even if there existed a video recording of an ancient performance of a Roman comedy, this would ultimately tell us very little about acting practices and gestures employed in, e.g., revivals of the same play). Moreover, if

the playwright attended the rehearsals for the first performance, he could *tell* the actors about gestures or comic business that were not in the script.²⁵ What we *can* say, then, on this matter, is that plenty of movements just *are* indicated in the text.

In general, I would see no point in having ‘practical’ gestures (walking, running, pointing, handing over an object, carrying something, and so on) imagined by the audience rather than actually witnessed on stage by them, when there is indication in the text that such gestures were expected. To claim the opposite would make the compositions of Plautus and Terence plays for recitation, a view incompatible both with the texts themselves and with the references to Roman theatrical production of (at least) the Republic. It is, for example, reasonable to assume that some sort of gesture would have been made in at least some of the lines which include a demonstrative pronoun (*hic*) or particle (*sic*) in the text, and in which a pointing gesture by the speaking actor would have indicated to the audience a location, or a manner of doing something, or the dismissive attitude of character A towards character B.²⁶

Likewise, the playwright may give specific instructions to character A on how to walk or in what fashion to stand, by making character B describe the movements of character A; consider, for instance, the elaborate posture and gestures which the comic slave Palaestrio, in an often-quoted passage from Plautus’ *Miles* (201-15), adopts in order to devise his scheme; these are characterised by the old man Periplectomenus as typical of a slave in comedies (213).²⁷ In the same comedy the courtesan Acroteleutium must pretend convincingly that she is a high-class matron; therefore, she should dress like one (791), have her hair done (792), wear a linen headband (792), and walk decently (872; cf. 897, 899). Like the boastful soldier Pyrgopolynices, who is described as standing in a proud fashion (1044-5), so the slave Sagaristio is seen to be walking in a vainglorious manner (*Per.* 306-8). It would be foolish to imagine that the Romans had only one way of perambulating decently or standing haughtily, and that the audience were expecting to see that and *only* that movement; on the contrary, since the audience were told that Acroteleutium and Pyrgopolynices would assume the roles of the decent spouse and the all-

important lover, respectively, *any* gesture these two characters made would have actually been interpreted as a comic attempt on their part to perform their roles persuasively.

Two of the very few Greek mimes that have survived complete (*POxy* 413) deal with the wrath of a lustful and murderous adulteress, and the rescue of a young girl from barbarians in a parody of Euripides' *Iphigeneia in Tauris*. Occasionally, the 'script' of these pieces, dated to the first century CE, makes sense only if we perceive it as a general outline of the plot, which the leading actress and her fellow mimes would embellish with gestures and would prolong by means of improvised jokes during the actual performance. In one of these texts, the actress playing the adulterous wife alludes to the sadness (56) or the surprise (81) she sees on the face of her slave. It would not be far-fetched to suppose that the maskless actor playing the role of the slave Spinther would have indicated sadness and surprise with the relevant facial expressions. This, however, need not have been the case, since playwrights in masked Greek comedy and tragedy often invited their audience to imagine the emotional fluctuations of their characters. Therefore, the references to the tears of the unjustly accused Alcumena (*Pl. Amph.* 529), of the enamoured Argyrippus (*Pl. As.* 620), of the unhappy Pamphila (*Pl. St.* 20), and of the embarrassed Aeschinus (*Ter. Ad.* 679) are not decisive arguments for the usage, or otherwise, of masks on the Roman stage. For, even if we could prove that the plays of the *fabula palliata* were sometimes performed by maskless actors, it would be absurd to argue that a character's tears would have been visible to the whole audience. Why assume that Plautus composed his plays only for the sake of those who sat in the front rows? On the other hand, the view that the playwright through the text invited the audience to imagine tears on a character's face does not mean that the actor who was supposed to be crying stood motionless on the stage. It is common nowadays in big theatres to make the audience think you are crying by raising your hand at the level of your eye and pretending to dry imaginary tears. Similar gestures and movements (for instance, veiling) may have been performed by ancient actors, both masked and maskless, when simulating grief.

Laughter, however, is a reaction that involves voice, and the signal for this is frequently provided by the playwright in the form of the question ‘why are you laughing?’ (Pl. *Tr.* 1142; Ter. *Eun.* 497, 1007, 1017); there are, also, several instances of kisses, embraces, and references to the hands, which seem to be used by character A to restrain character B, or by character A to hold and follow character B, or by character A to show to character B that nothing has been stolen; these references are always made clearly, and usually form part of an elaborate cluster of farcical stage-business.²⁸ Equally clear in the text are indications about a character’s fear, sadness, anger, joy, bashfulness, tiredness, drunkenness,²⁹ and silence,³⁰ as well as movements that lead to door-knocking scenes.³¹

Sometimes a plethora of figures of speech, all of them used by the same character at an emotionally charged moment of his life during the play, function as pointers towards some kind of gestures.³² The most instructive example of this case is, perhaps, the series of stage-directions suggested by Quintilian (11.3.182) for the proper acting of the celebrated opening lines of Terence’s *Eunuchus* (46-8), where the actor, in order to show convincingly his anxiety, ought, according to Quintilian, to make dramatic pauses, change the tone of his voice, move his hands, and turn his face this way and that; all of these instructions may be followed on the basis of the asyndeton, the aposiopesis, and the rhetorical questions in the agitated speech of the unhappy young-man-in-love, Phaedria. Moreover, Cicero tells us that an actor’s movements were inextricably linked to the rhythm of the music, and that if these two theatrical components were not harmoniously combined, the actor was hissed and thrown off stage (*Parad.* 3.2.26). We know very little about music in Roman drama, and the ways in which metrical schemes, such as identical patterns in line endings, or the delivery of longer iambo-trochaic meters, may have not only contributed to character-portrayal but also guided an actor’s steps; had we known more about these issues, our reconstruction of Phaedria’s movements and body-language might have amounted to more than mere speculation.³³

Finally, it is appropriate to expect gestures in scenes where the subject-matter is unashamedly presented from the beginning as no more than slapstick comedy, whose primary aim is not to move the action forward, but to stop it, and make the audience laugh. For example, it is possible to suggest that there were, in the repertory of Roman comedy, gestures which indicated a husband's madness, or a wife's anger, or an auctioneer's movements, or a young man's wrath; we could also assume that actors were supposed to reproduce these gestures at appropriate moments in their performance. But we need not suppose that Plautus, or his contemporaries, or even the audience that watched revivals of his plays, would have *always* expected to see these *and only these* set gesticulations, when watching, for instance, the simulated madness of Menaechmus II (Pl. *Men.* 828-75), or the tender manner of Menaechmus I in his effort to soothe his wife's anger (Pl. *Men.* 626-7), or the wrath in which the young Pistoclerus threatens his tutor Lydus (Pl. *Bacch.* 147), or the competition between Charinus and his father Demipho during an imaginary auction (Pl. *Merc.* 433-40). In other words, tracing rigid patterns of nonverbal behaviour in Roman comedy runs the risk of conflicting with the improvisational skills of Roman actors and the flexible nature of Roman drama as a whole. By this I mean that Roman comic drama, especially Plautine comedy that seems to have been influenced by unscripted forms of native Italian drama,³⁴ should be seen as exploiting traditional comic ideas (jokes, gestures, postures) in an innovative way; in this respect, Plautus' comic repertory is not stagnating, but re-invents itself every time it is performed.

So far my argument has been three-fold: namely, that we ought to treat cautiously and within its literary, social, declamatory, or artistic context any evidence on nonverbal behaviour in Roman comedy that derives from non-dramatic texts; that this evidence should not give the impression that acting in Roman comedy and mime entailed simply following a prescribed set of strict rules;³⁵ and that, when a gesture is expected in Plautine and Terentian comedy, *in most cases (but not always)* we need look no further than the text to find exactly when this should take place. In dealing with my material I extracted from their theatrical contexts and placed in the

same group passages from different playwrights that displayed common patterns of nonverbal communication. Nonetheless, this method obscures the more important issue of the function of these postures and gestures, and I would like to suggest that a better way forward is to examine patterns of nonverbal interaction *within* the scenes in which they are observed, and to consider why they are there, and what they tell us about the playwright who would like them to be there. Likewise, it is important to look at episodes of Roman comedies that seem to contain very few or no indications of comic nonverbal behaviour, and ask ourselves why this is so. This approach would involve comparative and in-depth analysis of the extant *fabula palliata* (plays and fragments) and of the extracts from the other surviving forms of Roman theatre (mime and *fabula Atellana*). I do not pretend to have completed such a task, but from a first reading of Plautus, Terence, and the fragments of the mimographers through this perspective I have not formed the impression that the farcical Plautus and the obscene Laberius *always* encouraged actors to favour gestures and stage-business that generate laughter and serve the comic moment, nor that the subtle Terence was averse to anything that detracted from the depth of the situation in which he had placed his fully drawn characters.

Two very brief examples, one from Plautus and one from Terence, will suffice to show what I mean. Consider, for example, the obvious comic business and body-language that need to be employed in Terence's *Eunuchus* in order to make Thraso's comic siege of Thais' house an effective slapstick scene (771-816). The stage-action is remarkably vigorous, and rivals in comic force some of the funniest moments in Plautine drama. On the other hand, listen to the lyric aria of Palaestra and visualise the ballet-like movements that the heroine of Plautus' *Rudens* and her companion Ampelisca might be envisaged to perform (185-258) in their attempt to find each other on the deserted sea-shore; the suffering of the two female characters resembles in seriousness situations from tragedy, and is strongly coloured by Plautus' choice of metrical patterns (cretics, bacchiacs, and anapaests) that express the turmoil of Palaestra's agitated heart.³⁶ Any sort of *comic* gesticulation, therefore, would be distracting, because it would undercut the

gravity of Palaestra's sufferings and blur the sharply drawn perspective of the tragic heroine, from which the playwright initially presents Daemones' long-lost daughter. Each instance, then, that involves some kind of nonverbal communication must be examined separately and evaluated on its own merit.

Character-portrayal of a young or old person, of a tricky slave or a greedy courtesan, of a melodramatic maiden or an active and lively daughter, and context would also be important for the style of acting (for example, the acting-style required for the role of the lively daughter in Plautus' *Persa* would have been different to the acting-style required for the role of the 'passive' daughter of Daemones in Plautus' *Rudens*). Moreover, the surviving testimonies of Roman orators and rhetoricians would suggest that a sharp line was drawn between the exaggerated movements of the stage and the naturalistic, 'everyday' style gestures that a persuasive public speaker was strongly advised to adopt. But it would be unwise to claim, on the basis of this, that all gestures in Roman comedy were exaggerated or completely non-representational. For example, when the loyal slave Trachalio rushes out of the temple of Venus near the beginning of what we call Act III of Plautus' *Rudens*, he begs the old man Daemones to help the girls Palaestra and Ampelisca who are being chased by the ruthless pimp Labrax inside the temple; his supplicatory gestures ought to be enacted in an exaggerated fashion so as to square with the long-windedness of his speech, the extraordinary imagery he uses, and the crisis taking place off-stage (615-40). However, earlier in the play the same girls had survived a shipwreck and sought refuge at the temple of Venus. *Their* supplicatory gestures in front of the priestess Ptolemaicia should be played in a naturalistic fashion, echoing conventional supplicatory gestures (whatever these may have been) without any element in them of exaggeration that would undermine the seriousness of the scene, already established by the tragic subject-matter and Plautus' choice of lyric metre (253-89).

In conclusion, I wish to make clear that I am *not* arguing that the acting style of Roman comedy and mime resembled the acting style nowadays employed in the plays of Ibsen or

Chekhov. Nor am I denying that there may well have been a ‘wardrobe’ of set gestures, which actors could adopt or adapt; in fact, an audience may have expected to see such body-language, which may have contributed to the success of the performance. What I *am* arguing, however, is (1) that this ‘wardrobe’ of set gestures neither was exhaustive nor excluded improvisation which may well have drawn on gestures of everyday life, and (2) that, in order to trace *some* of the action on stage, we need to start from the ‘internal’ (i.e. script-based) evidence, which may, sometimes and with caution, be corroborated by ‘external’ (i.e. not script-based) evidence. In my view, in Greco-Roman New Comedy and in the literary mime, the script and the plot of the play matter more than anything. Therefore, future enquiries in the field of nonverbal behaviour on the Roman comic stage should deal not with speculations on the reconstruction of a gesture a character performed in a given situation (in any case, it would be futile to argue with absolute certainty about this), but (more importantly) with a consideration of the reasons why the playwright inserted a gesture at this particular moment in his play. In other words, we should be asking ourselves not how a Roman actor expressed, say, fear, but how a gesture of fear (whatever this may have been) contributed to the theatrical context of the scene in which it is found, as a theatrical mechanism that enabled the playwright to delineate his characters, to create serious or comic atmosphere on stage, to pause the plot or to move it forward.

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Endnotes

¹ I should make clear at this point that I am not including in my discussion body-language in pantomime, because this type of theatrical entertainment did not have a ‘script’; therefore, mimetic gestures like those mentioned by Quintilian in relation to *saltatores* (11.3.88-9) are not taken into account in my remarks on rhetorical eloquence and theatre.

² In the absence of a comprehensive treatment of this topic, I found particularly useful the discussion of Baden 1831; Warnecke 1910; Taladoire 1951; and (recently) Aldrete 1999, 51-73. The study of nonverbal behavioural patterns seems to be more advanced in the field of Greek drama: see Mastronarde 1979; Boegehold 1999, 67-77; Montiglio 2000, 158-88; Poe 2003; moreover, commentators on Aristophanic comedy seem to have been, already in the late 1960s, much more aware of, and sensitive to, the theatrical dimensions of the text they were analysing: see, for example, Dover 1968, lxx-lxxx; MacDowell 1971, v; Taplin 1977. The publication of Easterling and Hall 2002 heralds a renewed interest in the theatrical, social, rhetorical, and intellectual meaning of acting techniques. Green 2002 and Handley 2002 raise important questions about the style of acting in Greek New Comedy. Roman Comedy is less fully catered for. Useful studies of nonverbal behaviour in individual Plautine plays have been made by the contributors to the volume edited by Lefèvre *et al.* 1991.

³ The best (and most recent) example of such a methodological approach is Christenson 2000; Slater 1985 paved the way for it. A notable exception to the scholarly approach that sought to identify Plautine alterations to the Greek original is Duckworth 1952, who builds on the work of earlier scholars such as H. W. Prescott.

⁴ See the salutary remarks of Gratwick 1999, 219.

⁵ See Wiles 1991, 192-208.

⁶ Diomedes was neither a theatre-critic nor a contemporary of the famous mimic playwrights Laberius, Publilius, or even Philistion. His description of the mimic sub-literary genre may have little to do with what actually happened on the Roman stage, and is clearly indebted to a definition that probably dates to Hellenistic times; see Giancotti 1967, 13-42.

⁷ The debate on whether or not actors in the *fabula palliata* of the Ciceronian era wore masks is well presented by Taladoire 1951, 73-85; and Kinsey 1980. Gratwick 1982, 83-4, rightly challenges the view that Roman adaptations of Greek New Comedy were, at the beginning, performed by maskless actors.

⁸ On the improvisational character of the Roman mime see Macrobius 2.7.7 (the story of the competition of Publilius with other mimographers by means of enacting scenarios improvised on the spot: 'cum [*sc.* Publilius] mimos componeret ingentique adsensu in Italiae oppidis agere coepisset, productus Romae per Caesaris ludos, omnes qui tunc scripta et operas suas in scaenam locaverant provocavit ut singuli secum posita in vicem materia pro tempore contenderent'), and cf. Fantham 1988, 155.

⁹ Chapter 7 of Garton 1972 is enticingly entitled 'How Roscius acted Ballio'. Although Garton does not look at Ballio's role in great detail, and his reconstruction of Roscius' acting as the famous pimp in Plautus' *Pseudolus* is rather speculative and vague, he has many stimulating ideas that can be developed fruitfully.

¹⁰ Some Greek mimic texts, in which there are directions for the musical background of the plot and the entrance of a character dressed in a particular manner, may constitute exceptions to this rule; see Page 1942, 338-9; and Pavese 1966, 68. In the same text, the so-called 'Charition-mime' (*P. Oxy.* 413), there are indications in abbreviated form of the points at which there ought to be musical accompaniment, and of the moments in the plot where the comic slave ought to fart; see Andreassi 2001, 55, 59, 60, 62, 68, 71, and 73. For surviving stage directions in Greek drama see Taplin 1977, 15, 371 n. 3; Taplin 1977(b), 121-31, and Handley 2002, 168-9.

¹¹ On these mosaics and the overall relationship between costume and movement see Wiles 1991, 188-208.

¹² The scholarly discussion about the date and the value of these illustrations as evidence for nonverbal behaviour on Terence's stage commences with Jones and Morey 1931, and includes contributions by Taladoire 1951, 53-57; Katsouris 1989, 189-99; Aldrete 1999, 54-67; and Dodwell 2000. The South Italian *phlyax*-vases portray comic theatrical scenes that often include intense gesticulation, but I have no way of telling whether this faithfully represents actual acting practices (South Italian or Athenian), or whether these gestures stem from the painter's idea of how such a comic scene ought to have been enacted. Some of these gestures are noted by Taplin 1993, 30-1, 59, and 81.

¹³ For gestures as further proof of the insincerity and histrionic behaviour exhibited by the characters inhabiting Petronius' world, see Panayotakis 1995, 5, 39-40, 157, and 173.

¹⁴ All the Terentian passages that receive some type of comment by Donatus from the point of view of performance-criticism are conveniently gathered in Warnecke 1910, 592-4, and Taladoire 1951, 49-52, and evaluated by Basore 1908.

¹⁵ See Cic. *De Orat.* 2.242, 2.244, 2.251-2, 2.274, 3.83; *Or.* 26.88; Quint. 6.1.46, 6.3.29. The significance of body language in Quintilian's rhetoric and the connection between declamatory gestures and theatrical performances has been amply discussed by, among others, Taladoire 1951, 89-122; Katsouris 1989; Maier-

Eichhorn 1989; Graf 1991; Aldrete 1999, 3-97 (a refreshing re-evaluation of the evidence from a political perspective); Fögen 2001; Fantham 2002, 362-76; Hall 2004; and Corbeill 2004, 107-67.

¹⁶ For a good illustration and discussion of this scene see Wiles 1991.

¹⁷ A good discussion of this passage from the perspective of the function of laughter is in Plaza 2000, 73-83.

¹⁸ Cic. *De Orat.* 3.220: 'omnis autem hos motus subsequi debet gestus, non hic verba exprimens scaenicus, sed universam rem et sententiam non demonstratione sed significatione declarans, laterum inflexione hac forti ac virili non ab scaena et histrionibus, sed ab armis et palaestra petitus'.

¹⁹ See Sen. *Ep. Mor.* 11.7: 'Artifices scaenici qui imitantur affectus ... hoc indicio imitantur verecundiam: deiiciunt vultum, verba submittunt, fingunt in terram oculos et deprimunt. Ruborem sibi exprimere non possunt'; and *Ep. Mor.* 114.6: 'hunc esse qui <in> tribunali, in rostris, in omni publico coetu sic apparuerit ut pallio velaretur caput exclusis utrimque auribus, non aliter quam in mimo fugitivi divitis solent'.

²⁰ See Graf 1991, 49-50: 'Conventionality is what we would expect from the gestures of comic stock characters; as to gestures, the little evidence that there is confirms it'. [At this point Graf refers in an endnote to Sen. *Ep. Mor.* 11.7 and to Petr. *Sat.* 19, both discussed here, but I fail to see how these passages support his general remarks.] ... 'Like theatrical gesture, rhetorical gesture and gesticulation is a sort of self-sufficient sign system, based upon gestures and gesticulations of daily life ... Such a conventional system is teachable, in fact it has to be taught: there are teachers of stagecraft, as there are teachers of rhetoric.'

²¹ This line of enquiry has been fruitfully applied to the study of Greek (mainly Aeschylean) tragedy more than to the study of Greek comedy. See Taplin 1977, 12-39 and above, n. 2. But 'Taplin's law' has been sceptically received by Wiles 1997.

²² See, for example, the stimulating remarks of Gratwick 1993, 31 on the authorship of Plautine prologues.

²³ See above, n. 10.

²⁴ I am here reminded of the references in an established text used by Roman actors to refer to contemporary characters (e.g. Octavian as 'gallus' in Suet. *D.A.* 68), and of the impromptu jokes that are inserted in modern Greek performances of Aristophanic comedies staged in the ancient theatre of Epidaurus. None of the jokes I heard or the comic business I witnessed at these performances originated from the text of Aristophanes, and all of them were understood and well received by the audience. In fact, the members of the audience in such performances, as well as in some comic operas (e.g. *Die Fledermaus*), expect to see and hear the actors improvising in certain parts of the plot.

²⁵ See Brown 2002, 232-3 on Ambivius Turpio in Terence's *Phormio*.

²⁶ See, for example, Pl. *Asin.* 797-801; *Rud.* 5; *Trin.* 124; Ter. *Andr.* 30, 333; *Eun.* 595; *Ph.* 210-11; *Ad.* 454.

²⁷ However, for all I know Palaestrio's gestures may have not been performed on stage previously, and Periplectomenus may be identifying them as servile gestures (*dulice et comoedice*) because the slave Palaestrio is the first to perform them.

²⁸ Kisses: Pl. *As.* 892; *Cas.* 471; *Curc.* 210; *Epid.* 582; *St.* 89; *Truc.* 526. Embraces: Pl. *As.* 615, 879; *Curc.* 172; *Most.* 322; *Poen.* 1260, 1266, 1269, 1301; *Rud.* 246, 1175, 1203; *Truc.* 370; Ter. *H.T.* 408. Use of hands: Pl. *Amph.* 532, 1076; *As.* 591; *Aul.* 640, 650; *Bacch.* 723; *Capt.* 838, 859; *Cas.* 221, 231; *Curc.* 307, 626; *Men.* 628; *Merc.* 149; *Poen.* 1259; *Per.* 225; *Rud.* 243; *Truc.* 124, 926; Ter. *And.* 789; *Ad.* 781.

²⁹ Plautine and Terentian examples for the indication on stage of each of these feelings are conveniently gathered in Taladoire 1951, 30-4. Taladoire, also, gathers in groups gestures that are repeatedly associated with love-scenes and with slaves (1951, 37-48).

³⁰ For such examples involving questions of the type 'nil respondes?' or 'quid taces?' see McGlynn 1967 s.v. TACEO I. (1) and RESPONDEO III.

³¹ Pl. *Amph.* 1019; *As.* 382; *Bacch.* 579, 1117; *Cist.* 637; *Men.* 987; *Most.* 445, 674, 936; *Poen.* 729, 1120; *Pseud.* 1121; *St.* 308, 310; *Trin.* 868, 871; *Truc.* 254; Ter. *H.T.* 410; *Ad.* 633, 788. On door-knocking scenes see Brown 1995.

³² Especially useful in this respect is the line of enquiry vigorously put forth by Boegehold 1999.

³³ For excellent discussions on the contribution of music and metre to characterisation in Plautus and Terence, see, respectively, Moore 1999, and Gratwick 1999, 231-5.

³⁴ See, for example, Little 1938; Lefèvre *et al.* 1991; Benz *et al.* 1995.

³⁵ See, for instance, above n. 19.

³⁶ See Marx 1959, 89 ff.; Fay 1983, 179-80.