Graveyard frolics

ALEXANDER TULLOCH

Some 'entertaining' etymologies

WE ALL NEED to relax. Teachers, doctors, solicitors, bricklayers, salesmen, shop assistants and even grossly over-paid footballers all need a break. Once we have performed whatever daily task it is that provides us with our daily bread, we need to recharge our batteries, 'chill out' (as they now say) and do something entirely different to help us unwind. There are those who like to take part in some form of sporting activity whereas others prefer to settle down with a good book or crash out in front of the telly. And then there are those who would rather have an enjoyable meal at a decent restaurant and take in a show or go to what we seem to refer to increasingly as the 'movies' where they can 'check out' the most recent Bond film or Spielberg production. Whatever our preference, entertainment of one form or another plays a vital role in everyone's life and some choices, whether we are aware of it or not, link us with ancient societies whose need to enjoy themselves now and again was no less than ours is today.

Take the cinema. When Thomas Edison patented his 'kinetoscope' in 1891 he probably had no idea of the multimillion-dollar industry his invention would eventually spawn. And the same can be said of the Lumière brothers who came along a few years later (actually 1895) with their 'cinématographe,' generally recognised as the impetus that was to turn a private fascination into an art form enjoyed by millions throughout the world.

From a linguistic point of view, however, the interesting connection between the Lumière brothers and Edison is that they both turned to ancient Greek when they were searching for a name for their invention. Edison's 'kinetoscope' is taken from two Greek verbs *kineō* 'to move' and *skopeō* 'to behold' as he saw his invention as a device that would enable people to watch moving images. The French term 'cinématographe' has a derivation similar to Edison's term: 'cinéma' was the French form of the Greek *kinēma* 'movement' and 'graphe' was a transliteration of the Greek *graphē* 'writing' 'drawing' so in this case perhaps 'moving drawings or pictures' would be a closer literal translation. Certainly it is very close to the term the Americans chose very early on in the history cinematography, 'the movies.'

But of course the cinema can be seen as a technological development of a far older art form: the theatre. And if we turn a linguist eye in this direction, once again we find the whole subject teeming with Greek terminology. The very term 'theatre' was a direct borrowing of the Greek *theatron*, which was originally applied to the terrace where the ancient Athenians would sit and watch a play by Aristophanes or Aeschylus or any one of a number of playwrights whose works have survived for us to enjoy. And *theatron* was derived from the noun *thea* 'spectacle' and the verb *theaomai* 'I gaze at.'

A further development of the theatre in classical times was, of course, the amphitheatre.



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Here the Greek noun has acquired the prefix *amphi-* 'on both sides' so that spectators could view the performance from both sides. The result was that the normal semicircular design was expanded into a full circle. Curiously, however, the first amphitheatre was not Greek but Roman, built by the emperor Vespasian in Rome in the first century AD and known throughout the world as the Colosseum.

One interesting architectural feature of the Roman amphitheatre has led to a certain amount of misunderstanding. The word *vomitorium* has been mistakenly understood as a part of a Roman house or villa where house guests who had over-indulged at dinner could bring up all they had eaten (and drunk!) of their generous host's fare. In fact, although the word is derived from the Latin *vomĕre* 'to vomit' the *vomitorium* was an exit passage leading from the inside of the amphitheatre to a place where the spectators, after the show, could 'spew out' onto the streets before setting off home, perhaps calling in at a local *taberna* on the way.

But to return to ancient Athens. In front of the seating area or *theatron* the normal arrangement was to have the *orchēstra.* Now this word had nothing to do with our understanding of the term as used today. The Athenian spectators would not have seen a group of musicians whose task it was to play music in keeping with the mood of the action evolving on the stage. Originally the *orchēstra* was a space set aside for dancing as can be deduced from the etymology of the word: *orcheomai* meant 'I dance' and, to take the linguistic association a little further, the verb *orcheomai* was a variant of another, *ornumi* 'I am agitated, stirred, roused'. Presumably in ancient times dancing was seen as an aroused, even agitated, state which contrasted sharply with one's normal self-controlled serenity.

The dancers who added additional interest and entertainment to the performance were known as the *choros,* another word that has changed its meaning. A 'chorus' (as it is now spelled in modern English) is usually understood as a repeated part of a song, but to the ancient Greeks it was, strictly speaking, a circular dance although it did acquire the more general meaning of a celebratory dance performed at festivals in honour of one or more of the gods. Something of this original meaning can still be seen in the way we refer to a 'chorus line' of dancing girls and how the art of devising dance steps for actors and dancers is known technically as 'choreography.'

By the time classical *drama* (simply the Greek for 'that which is being done') was in full swing the 'chorus' had taken on a speaking role and was required to comment on what the audience was witnessing on stage. The word acquired its modern English meaning only in the eighteenth century, although it had entered English by the seventeenth century to denote a group of singers, but by now had changed its spelling to 'choir'.

An interesting feature of the modern performance arts is the way in which these places of entertainment have preserved their classical links simply in the names by which they are known. Throughout the English-speaking world certain names appear with almost predictable regularity: the Hippodrome, the Lyceum, the Plaza, but the leader by a mile has to be the Odeon.

The first Odeon was founded by the Athenian soldier and statesman Pericles (c. 495 – 429 BC) whose aim was to create a venue for the citizens of Athens to enjoy musical entertainment and this aim is reflected in the derivation of the word. *Ōdeion*, as it appeared in its Greek form, was derived from the word *ōdē* 'song, lay' which has also given us the term 'ode'.

Interestingly, this word (from the verb *aeidein* 'to sing') had earlier been combined with another verb *rhaptein* 'to sew', 'to weave' to produce another noun *rhapsōdos*, a kind of wandering minstrel who made a living in ancient times travelling around Greece 'weaving together' and reciting poetry, particularly the poems of Homer. The abstract noun to denote this activity was *rhapsōdia* 'the reciting of epic poetry' and this noun has come down through the centuries and given us our word 'rhapsody' although the association with extravagant effusion dates in English only from the seventeenth century. And what of our words 'poem' and 'poet'? These are simply from the Greek *poein* 'to do', 'to make,' a derivation reflected in the archaic English term for a poet, 'a maker'.

Traditionally the performances we see at a theatre have been divided into two categories, tragedy and comedy, depending on whether the subject matter is serious or frivolous. Both words have interesting, and very surprising, linguistic histories.

It usually comes as something of a revelation to most people that the word 'tragedy' is derived from the Greek word *tragos* 'goat'. It has been suggested that the reason for this was

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that in the early Athenian theatre the convention was for actors to dress up in goat skins if the play in which they were performing was serious rather than humorous. But another, and probably more likely, explanation is that many of these plays were produced for, and performed at, festivals where there was always a certain element of competition. Actors acted their hearts out and, at the end of the day, the one judged to be the best was presented with a goat as his prize.

The origin of the word 'comedy' is a bit more problematic. In fact there is something of a disagreement here among some of our most respected etymologists. The majority of them now seem to agree that the root of the word is the Greek *kōmos* 'revelry' which itself is related to *kōmē*, 'village' (cognate with 'home' in English) and that uproarious comedies had their linguistic and social origins in the rollicking sylvan festivals which featured so prominently in the Greek calendar.

However, Walter Skeat offers a much more intriguing explanation. He relates the noun *kōmos* to the verb *keimai* 'I lie down' and suggests that a comedy was originally enjoyed by revellers as they customarily reclined on cushions or early versions of the chaise longue, eating and drinking as they enjoyed the floor show.

The difference of opinion here is, however, more apparent than real as a closer analysis of the noun *kōmē* 'village' reveals that it, too, has its origins in the verb *keimai* and would have been applied in primitive times to those societies that had 'settled down' in a particular area as opposed to those who preferred a more nomadic existence.

But now comes the real surprise. Another Greek noun derived from the verb *keimai* was *koimētērion* – a place where the dear departed could 'lie' at peace for the rest of eternity. And by the fourteenth century this word had made its way into English as 'cemetery'.

So, strange as it might seem, the evidence appears convincing that 'comedy' and 'cemetery' are essentially the same word. ■

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