Didaskalia is an electronic journal dedicated to the study of all aspects of ancient Greek and Roman performance.

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Note

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Lysistrata Jones

Book by Douglas Carter Beane
Music and Lyrics by Lewis Flinn
Directed and choreographed by Dan Knechtges
Walter Kerr Theatre, New York

December 4, 2011 – January 8, 2012
Reviewed performance: December 28, 2011

Review by John Given
East Carolina University

Josh Segarra as Mick and Patti Murin as Lysistrata

Exactly 50 years after E. Y. "Yip" Harburg adapted Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* into a Broadway musical, under the title *The Happiest Girl in the World*, Lysistrata returned to Broadway, this time in the form of a perky, blonde college cheerleader. The musical began life, with mostly the same cast and crew, as *Give It Up!* at the Dallas Theater Center and then, retitled *Lysistrata Jones*, had an Off-Broadway production by the Transport Group Theatre Company at the Gym at Judson Memorial Church. The small show transferred to Broadway's Walter Kerr Theatre, where it ran for just 34 previews and 30 performances before closing on January 8, 2012, after disappointing holiday sales. With a book by Douglas Carter Beane and music and lyrics by Lewis Flinn, *Lysistrata Jones* is an imperfect but clever and entertaining adaptation. Rather than redirecting men's passion for violence toward a passion for sex, this modern-day Lysistrata aims to end men's apathy for everything *except* sex and to create passionate desires for things more noble.

The unlikely setting for this new Aristophanes is a basketball court. Lysistrata Jones (Patti Murin), a transfer student to Athens University, is the girlfriend of Mick (Josh Segarra), the captain of the hoopster Spartans. (Yes, the guys play for the Athens Spartans, "two completely different Greek city-states," as the nerdy Xander (Jason Tam) informs us.) The Spartans have not won a game in 33 years, a fact which bothers Mick and his teammates not a jot nor a tittle. So long as they get their post-game parties with their girlfriends, they are content with losing. Lysistrata decides to put an end to the men's indifference by persuading her fellow cheerleaders to "give up giving it up" to their boyfriends until they win a game.

Already knowing the outlines of the plot, I attended the show fearing that I would be disappointed by the trivialization of Aristophanes' antiwar comedy. The production, though, proved to be more substantial than the lightweight plot. We learn early in Act I that Lysistrata has been surrounded by quitters her whole life. Her parents, as young fringe-theater types (hence their daughter's name), quit first on their careers and then on each other. Her previous university was a sea of apathy. She now refuses to allow her new school to wallow in indifference. A means for effecting change comes to her attention when she reads the SparkNotes ("unabridged!") of her namesake. By persuading the girlfriends to forgo sex, she hopes to teach everyone that there is more to life than sex and parties. The greatest nod to Aristophanes comes when one of the men, venting his sexual frustrations, suggests that the men could redirect their energies into violence against other men. The others find the suggestion unattractive and decide to go to a brothel instead.

The sequence indicates that we are closer to the Aristophanic framework than it first seemed. The men still possess the basest desires: an unattractive desire for violence, and a much more attractive desire for sex. The desire for violence could have been sublimated into a desire for war or for patriotism, but this option does not seem to occur to these American college men, even at a time when the country is at war. Instead, they simply reject violence and cling to sexual desire as the only worthwhile passion. Beane and Flinn thereby set up a plot that will require the men to develop new desires of a higher order. *Lysistrata Jones* thus takes a step beyond *Lysistrata*. Whereas Aristophanes' play returns to the status quo after Athens and Sparta are reconciled, with the desires for war and sex merely reordered, the musical seeks to point its characters in a new direction. Toward the end of the musical, Mick accuses Lysistrata of trying to make the men "nobler." And, within the limitations of a very particular (and admittedly not very exceptional) conception of nobility, the musical succeeds. One player exchanges simple sex for a sincere profession of love. Another embraces his inner poet, proves he can recite beautiful verse at will, and falls for the library assistant Robin (Lindsay Nicole Chambers). Two other men find love in each other. A fifth drops his façade and embraces his own name (more on him below). Love, poetry and beauty, one's true self—finally, the men discover desires beyond base sexual cravings. As they defeat Syracuse to end their basketball losing streak, so too does nobility defeat apathy.

A major flaw in the show is the development of the female characters. (The one exception is Myrrhine; see below.) Although all the women, except Lysistrata and Robin, value sex as much as the men, it remains unclear how they come to value the "nobler" pursuits. As in Aristophanes, they are reluctant participants in Lysistrata's scheme and repeatedly attempt to desert her cause. She always reels them back in, but in the end their noble development lies primarily in acceptance of the men's nobility. Too typical is the woman whose boyfriend leaves her for his teammate. She gleefully accepts their new relationship because he did not leave her for another woman, concluding that "it wasn't about *me*!" Her egoism remains to the end. Worst, though, is Lysistrata herself. She does have a triumphant moment of girl power in the end. For most of the play, however, the creative team has tapped too readily into the stereotype of the sweet but dumb blonde. She crumbles too quickly under her friends' criticism to be an effective leader, and she thereby fails to become the moral center of the play that she is set up to be. In general, although the production deals with race and sexual orientation in progressive (if generally safe) ways, it is far less forceful about gender issues, casting the women as naturally moral creatures who are intuitively able to lead the deficient men to the gardens of goodness.

The sex strike is the only essential part of the Aristophanic original that remains in *Lysistrata Jones*. Gone are the ploy to seize the Athenian treasury as well as the Commissioner character, though I could imagine the women storming the university's financial-aid office to cut off the men's athletic scholarships, with the university cashier ineffectually facing them down. Also gone are the male and female hemichoruses and the face-to-face battles that they bring to the stage. There are no older adults—no coaches or faculty members to disrupt the proceedings. Instead, the male and female students themselves enact the confrontations that Aristophanes gives to the hemichoruses.

There are in the production a few tidbits to make the classicist smile. Like Aristophanes, it contains up-to-date political and cultural references,[1] but it has various classical allusions too. The drop curtain that greets the entering audience is a solid blue—the blue of the modern Greek flag—with the Athens University seal centered upon it. The university, we see, was founded in 411 B.C., the date of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*. We also read the university's motto, "Faith Hope Charity," which may be a clue more to the play's conception of nobility than to anything Aristophanic. Besides Syracuse, the Athens Spartans play Corinth Community College and Ithaca College. A flier in the library rather oddly instructs students who want to "learn Greek fast" to "call Aneas [*sic*]." The cheerleaders' skirts have Greek

geometric patterns and are cut to resemble the typical skirt of a hoplite's linothorax. At a bacchanal dance, the characters appear in Greek-like costumes, and one of them is dressed as Pan. And so forth. Some things are distinctly un-Aristophanic, most notably the almost total lack of obscenity. And one minor detail I regretted was that Athena entered on a chariot pulled by a peacock, apparently borrowed from Hera's iconography.

Not regrettable is the musical's handling of what may be Aristophanes' most famous scene: the confrontation between Cinesias and Myrrhine. In the ancient play, Cinesias asks Lysistrata to send out his wife Myrrhine. Lysistrata, like a brothel madam, asks for her slice of the pie, but when he offers his phallus instead of money, she exits. Myrrhine enters and taunts Cinesias by performing a striptease for him. She abandons him at the last minute, though, and promises to satisfy him only after he agrees to peace. *Lysistrata Jones* also has characters named Myrrhine (LaQuet Sharnell) and Cinesias (Alex Wyse). Myrrhine (here pronounced "mer-een," almost "Maureen"), a black woman,[2] is the most intelligent of the cheerleaders and the least resistant to Lysistrata's plans. Cinesias is a white man from an affluent family who has rejected his parents' culture, turned the bill of his baseball cap to one side, and now speaks disconcertingly like a hip-hop artist from the 'hood. His "slave name," he says in Act I, is Todd. "Cinesias," it seems, is this misguided white boy's attempt to pick a black-sounding name. His whole persona is an act of condescension portrayed as an innocent attempt at popularity.

The Act II confrontation is set up when the basketball players decide to visit a brothel, the "Eros Motor Lodge," and Myrrhine decides to get revenge for Cinesias's dalliance. She dons a Tina Turner wig and a tight skirt and, safely disguised, gets Cinesias sent to her room at the brothel, where they perform the song "Don't Judge a Book." Beane and Flinn thus reprise Aristophanes' striptease scene with some interesting twists. Instead of disrobing, Myrrhine puts on clothes in order to make the tease effective. She stoops into a lower social register to kick her boyfriend unceremoniously out of his basement of offensive condescension. Thereby, instead of pointing Cinesias toward interstate reconciliation, she points him toward reconciliation with himself. During the scene, she gets him to answer to "Todd," and he—partly (old habits die hard)—drops the hip-hop persona. The most important clothing removal happens when Myrrhine takes off her wig and reveals her own true identity so that the lovers can be reunited. All Cinesias needs to do is win a basketball game, and he leaves determined to do so.

The musical features a significant new character, named Hetaira (played by Liz Mikel). She is the madam of the Eros Motor Lodge (taking a hint from Aristophanes' Cinesias-and-Myrrhine scene), but also the musical's narrator, Greek chorus, and *dea ex machina*. The director, Dan Knechtges, has done a fine job of making her multiple functions clear to the audience. Sometimes she is placed downstage right or upstage left, suitably for viewing the action. At other times, she appears on a platform above the stage, otherwise occupied only by the band. She is the only actor who appears above. Often she moves among the characters, but she addresses the audience directly as narrator or commentator. Her transition from narrator to Eros Motor Lodge madam is accomplished very smoothly in order to make the audience realize that, even in this function, she wields a power over the proceedings that is surpassed only by her height advantage over all the other actors, including the men. As the madam she can thus counsel the women on how to make their sex strike more effective and can manipulate the men onto the more passionate and noble paths the women expect. Not merely moving the plot forward, Hetaira accepts the role that Lysistrata failed to take up: the moral center of the play. She represents a sexuality that is boisterous but always tempered by the greater passions of human life. It is no coincidence, I presume, that she appears in the finale dressed as the virgin goddess Athena.

Lysistrata Jones, then, is an entertaining repurposing of the *Lysistrata* story. As a musical, it is moderately successful. The plot is entertaining. The music is listenable but not generally memorable. With its small

cast, small band, simple set requirements, and generally safe themes, the show should have a healthy life in college theater departments. (A cast recording, which is reportedly not yet in the works, would help the show's future immensely.) I hope the authors will allow later producers and directors to alter lines to reflect current events, just as producers and directors of Aristophanes regularly do. As an Aristophanic adaptation, seen from a classicist's perspective, it is also moderately successful. There is enough Aristophanes left to hold some cross-cultural literary interest. The metaphor of athletic passion for the greater passions of love and beauty works well and, although the noble goals never transcend the individual characters, they save the musical from trivializing the Aristophanic antiwar plot. At one point, Mick wonders at how people keep going to the theater to see plays that are almost 2,500 years old. With *Lysistrata Jones*, thousands more are fortunate to join the millennia of theatergoers.

notes

[1] At the December 28 performance, I caught, among many other references, allusions to the death of Kim Jong-Il and to the pose recently named "Tebowing" (after the Denver Broncos quarterback Tim Tebow), both of which must have been added after Broadway performances began.

[2] Her race is apparently not central to her character: Ms. Sharnell's understudy is white.