

THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN THEATER AND THE ARTS AGAINST WAR

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Abstract

The 5th-century dramatic poet Aristophanes turns against Athenian Democracy, striving to bring about profound upheavals in the political life of a country trapped in the nightmare of war. Exhausted by the shameless political machinations of his time, he composes a trilogy—"The Acharnians", "Peace", and "Lysistrata"—aiming to introduce a different way of thinking to the people. Through examples, he highlights the incompetence of the men in power, afflicted by the syndrome of hubris [1], as the true culprits behind the suffering brought by war.

Centuries later, Giraudoux, in his play "The Trojan War Will Not Take Place", appears to endorse Aristophanes' views, crafting a work aimed at convincing his people that the best defense against tragedy is to refuse to believe in its inevitability. He introduces the technique of reverse thinking, bringing contemporary tragedy to the stage, much like Edward Bond and Howard Barker [2].

The internal didascalies of both works, enhanced by interartiality, seem to resonate with the soul of the composer Leonard Cohen, awakening his hidden self and the painful childhood he endured during the German occupation, inspiring him to compose "Dance Me to the End of Love." Similarly, they act as an all-seeing eye, a sun, inspiring the painter Yves Tanguy to stage-design the brutality of war through his work "Multiplication of the Arcs" (1954). Playwrights and artists alike seek to demonstrate that the antidote to egocentrism, which undermines peaceful coexistence, is the strengthening of love within society—one that transcends borders and prejudices.

Keywords: contemporary tragedy, didascalies, theater, arts

INTRODUCTION

In an era where humanity endures the scourge of war, it seeks a glimmer of salvation through theater and the arts. Playwrights Aristophanes and Giraudoux emerge as benefactors of humankind, investigating the root causes of catastrophe while focusing on the humanizing aspects of character, in line with Lessing's concept of the real individual, with all their flaws [3]. Thus, these two dramatists propose ways to avert suffering, crafting utopian didascalies designed to guide readers and spectators on imaginary journeys where peace prevails. Through the signs- didascalies of theatrical texts, a synthesis of the arts emerges, appearing as a dialogue between the playwright and the artists—an eternal medium of communication among nations.

ARISTOPHANES AND GIRAUDOUX: THE PLAYWRIGHTS OF DEHUMANIZATION

The 5th-century dramatic poet Aristophanes turns against Athenian Democracy, striving to bring about profound upheavals in the political life of a country trapped in the nightmare of war. He enriches his works with numerous elements that serve as political and social didascalies, which may, in fact, be among the only surviving testimonies of Athens' political condition in his time. Exhausted by the shameless political machinations of his era, Aristophanes recognizes that the only means to educate the people and turn them against the Peloponnesian War is through theater—his comedies. Using the comic, he attempts to highlight the tragic. He invents utopian didascalies, a literary device designed to create imaginary settings and fairy-tale-like narratives, aiming to free the human spirit from suffering.

He delves into the deeper meaning of human misery, searching for the root of destruction, analyzing and psychologically dissecting the politicians of his time. He concludes that the problem originates from the flawed character of individuals, which is evidently a result of inadequate education. Thus, he composes

a trilogy—*The Acharnians*, *Peace*, and *Lysistrata*—aiming to introduce a different way of thinking to the people. Through examples, he exposes the incompetence of the men in power, holding them accountable for the hardships of war. Aristophanes could be considered a forerunner of Molière, as his ultimate goal is the improvement of human character. His didascalies are as utopian as they are truthful. He successfully reveals to the Athenian people the dishonest actions of their rulers by depicting real events. A prime example of this is *The Acharnians*.

The year *The Acharnians* is performed, the Peloponnesian War—which began in 431 BCE—continues with no hope for peace in sight. A farmer from Acharnae, bearing the symbolic name Dikaiopolis, meaning "the one who seeks justice in the city," realizes that there is no hope for peace through the actions of the Ecclesia (the Athenian assembly). In response, he implements his revolutionary plan: he takes the bold step of negotiating a private peace treaty with the Spartans. Aristophanes seeks to demonstrate to the people that the true culprits of war are the incompetent politicians themselves. He highlights the irresponsibility of an Assembly that passionately votes one day and repents the next—without holding itself accountable but rather punishing those who misled it. The restriction of legislative power to those who can attend the Ecclesia, the encouragement of demagogues, and the ostracism of capable individuals continuously disrupt the governance of the state. As a result, every government is inherently flawed and incompetent, inevitably leading the people into a state of war. From his earliest works, Aristophanes' verbal didascalies reveal his perspectives on the political life of the city:

DIKAIOPOLIS

I see the Pnyx abandoned here. They chatter
in the agora, while the officials cordon off
the area with a rope dyed red,
forcing the crowd to rush to the assembly.
Yet they try to slip away.
Even our leaders have not yet appeared
they will arrive late, pushing and shoving,
a flood, to secure the front seats,
but not a single thought will they spare for peace.

(Aristophanes, *The Acharnians*, v. 19–27)

In *Peace*, the protagonist is Trygaeus, a humble and honest vineyard owner who can no longer endure the misfortunes brought by war. Determined to put an end to the suffering, he decides to ascend to the heavens, riding a giant dung beetle that he himself has raised for this purpose. His goal is to bring his grievances before Zeus and plead for peace for the sake of all Greeks. Upon reaching the heavens, he learns from Hermes that the gods have abandoned their usual dwelling, retreating to the highest point of the sky in frustration over the incessant hostilities among rival factions. In their place, the god War remains, having imprisoned Peace inside a cave and preparing to grind all the cities in a mortar to destroy them.

Horried by these revelations, Trygaeus resolves that Peace must be freed at all costs. At that very moment, his loyal servants arrive. Together, with the help of Hermes, they manage to move the boulder blocking the entrance to the cave and release Peace. The remainder of the comedy becomes a celebration of peace—a joyous festivity in honor of the goddess' liberation:

TRYGAEUS

Now is the time, men of Greece,
to free ourselves from battles and strife,
to drag forth the longed-for Peace,
before another pestle blocks our way.

Run, farmers, merchants, craftsmen, and carpenters,
foreigners, metics, islanders—come, all of you!
Take up your mattocks, crowbars, and ropes!
It is time for us to drink in celebration of this good fortune!

(Aristophanes, *Peace*, v. 293–300)

Aristophanes seeks to rouse the weak and "blind" citizens, urging them to revolt against shameless politicians and bring about change. His focus remains on humanity, shaping a theater of humanism. As Sophia Felopoulou states, «his concept of humanism is not related to the Renaissance ideal of the perfect man; on the contrary, for him, humanism means dehumanization. To be truly human, one must accept their darker self. The refusal to acknowledge it—the abject, as Kristeva describes—leads to an emphasis on the tragic.» [4]

The dramatic poet also aims to steer the Athenian citizen away from dehumanization, ensuring they do not remain condemned outside the symbolic order of the world. Instead, he seeks to help them rediscover their other half—the part that completes human existence—and awaken their consciousness, ultimately liberating them from the dire state in which they find themselves.

To achieve this, the playwright employs the creation of works based on the concept of the "functional or beneficial lie," which is closely tied to imagination. Likewise, Aristophanes, disillusioned by the corrupt politicians of Athens, strives to construct an idealized vision of power by crafting comedies where women take center stage. For instance, in *Lysistrata*, the woman who can "dissolve armies" can undoubtedly create her own utopia. Twenty years after the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War, Athens and Sparta remain locked in an endless conflict. Human losses and destruction continue unabated on both sides, while every attempt at peace has failed. Yet, the Athenian Lysistrata refuses to despair and devises an unconventional plan to end the hostilities. Along with Lampito, the leader of the Spartan women, she declares a universal and strict sexual abstinence among women, aiming to compel the men of both warring factions into negotiating a truce and establishing peace.

LYSISTRATA

Then I shall reveal my secret,
I will hide it no longer:
If we, O women, truly wish
to force our men to reconciliation,
we must abstain.

(Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, v. 118–122)

Aristophanes' decision to assign a leading role to women raises many questions. In the 5th century, women were considered inferior beings. They did not participate in public affairs, nor were they even permitted to attend theatrical performances [5].

One interpretation is that the playwright uses this device to expose the incompetence of those in power. By doing so, he seeks to convince the Athenians that even women—who are entirely absent from political life—appear more capable of governing than the corrupt politicians of the time.

Giraudoux appears to endorse the same perspective in his play *The Trojan War Will Not Take Place*. He constructs a work aimed at convincing his people that the best defense against tragedy is to refuse to believe in its inevitability, introducing the technique of reverse thinking [6]. By doing so, he examines the monstrous criminal acts committed by humankind, aligning with the views of the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, who argues that such acts render humans both witnesses and accomplices to this brutality [7].

A play that uses myth merely as a pretext to highlight the dangerous rise of violence and anxiety in Europe—developments that would ultimately lead to World War II. From the very title of his work, the playwright cultivates positive thinking, a method that demonstrates how to overcome the obstacles that hinder our happiness, such as fear, insomnia, feelings of inferiority, or psychological disappointments. War is the central theme in Giraudoux's works, as it was also at the heart of discussions in Europe during his time—a continent experiencing the realities of war. The playwright critiques the futility of war by shifting the setting to Troy. The characters, familiar from the *Iliad*, serve as reflections of the European reality. Like Giraudoux himself, the heroes who once fought do not hesitate to renounce their heroic identity and honorary titles for the sake of peace. Yet, there are always two opposing camps: those who strive for peace and those who, from a position of safety and at the expense of the true heroes, desire war.

The playwright, through the character of the poet Demodocus—who composes verses and war hymns—employs ironic didascalies to oppose the war propaganda of his time. Demodocus' foolishness and cynicism make him an enemy of Hector and peace, positioning him as an adversary to the playwright himself. Upon returning from his last battle, Hector promises Andromache that he will do everything in his power to secure peace. However, Paris' actions and the attitudes of the elders complicate his mission. A new war looms on the horizon. A tragic figure who foreshadows the course of the play is Cassandra. She stands at the crossroads of past and future, serving as the voice of reality—one that refuses to accommodate the utopian vision of the protagonist and, by extension, the playwright himself.

It is the awareness of war's brutality and the hidden motives behind it. Between the two opposing forces—peace and war—Helen wavers, caught in dialogues that verge on the absurd. She refuses to choose a side, surrendering herself to the will of the leaders. Without resistance, yet fully aware of the symbolic weight of her existence and setting herself apart from the masses, she obeys their commands. As in other works by the playwright, female figures appear to be more conscious of the harsh reality, while men are the ones who envision a better future. The irony of the play lies in the fact that war is not only a crime but also a mistake—because Paris and Helen do not truly love each other. A genuine love might have justified the war. But no—its tragic absence makes the war even more cruel.

Andromache: So, I beg you, Helen. You see me here, clinging to you as if I were pleading for you to love me. Love Paris. Or tell me that I am wrong. Tell me that you will die if he perishes! That you would accept being disfigured so that he may live! ... Then war will not be an injustice but a plague. I will try to endure it.

(Giraudoux, *The Trojan War Will Not Take Place*, Scene 8)

Helen, despite knowing her fate, understands the necessity of peace and supports Hector in his efforts. The doors to war begin to close. Hector endures humiliation and Ajax's blow before Andromache's eyes—all for the sake of peace. The hero momentarily sheds the heroic mask imposed upon him by others, revealing his true, war-worn, and wounded humanity. He negotiates Helen's honor while simultaneously undermining the masculinity of Paris and his entire lineage. The didascalies heighten the reader's or spectator's sense of suspense, reaching a climax in the scene between Hector and Odysseus. Here, the protagonist comes to a profound realization: before every war, adversaries meet, genuinely attempting to preserve peace, only to inevitably descend into conflict. Equally poignant is the scene of Odysseus' departure and his walk toward the ships—a moment that feels like a countdown, each passing second drawing closer to peace through the surrender of Helen.

If Helen serves as the pretext, then the peacemaker Hector becomes the true catalyst of war. He makes the fatal move—killing Demodocus—and his death is turned against him. The *hybris* of a single death ignites the conflict. The blending of past and present, of imagination and reality, exposes the cruelty of humanism, justified under the guise of divine will. Can fate be overcome by rational human will? The playwright continues to hope that the moment will come when *The Trojan War Will Not Take Place*. His longing for peace is evident, even as Europe prepares for war.

THE REFLECTION OF THE TRAGIC IN THE ARTS

When studying theatrical works, didascalies function as an *all-seeing eye*, a *sun*. The text reflects in the reader's eyes, allowing for a unique interpretation. Examining the plays of Aristophanes and Giraudoux, their writing could be described as pictorial. The eye of the reader-spectator acts as a sun [8], stimulating the imagination, while intertextual reflection guides our thoughts to Yves Tanguy's 1954 painting *Multiplication of the Arcs*, which depicts the brutality of war. Scattered human bones, inexplicable gray objects—cold as steel—are gathered beneath a melancholic sky. In the distance, faint strokes of light emerge, as if anticipating the arrival of a rainbow—the hope of a new life after total destruction.



Yves Tanguy, *Multiplication of the Arcs*, 1954.

Arches may serve as an unfiltered bridge between life and death. At times, the didascalies of dramatic texts are perceived by musicians as a sun-ear, for writing is also vocal.

Thus, as we study the dramatic works of Aristophanes and Giraudoux, the didascalies become phonetic, transforming into sound. They could even serve as an auditory backdrop to these plays, accompanied by Leonard Cohen's *Dance Me to Your Beauty with a Burning Violin*.

Cohen himself revealed that the inspiration behind this song is far darker than one might imagine. He wrote it upon learning that, during World War II, in Nazi concentration camps, orchestras were forced to play music while people were burned alive. The song may have been born from stories he heard or read about these camps. In some of them, right next to the crematoriums, a quartet of musicians was coerced into playing classical music while others perished in the flames. Thus, the haunting lyric "Dance me to your beauty with a burning violin" encapsulates the paradoxical beauty of witnessing the final moments of a life—the culmination of existence.

CONCLUSION

We conclude that theatrical texts represent a synthesis of the arts, creating an imaginary dialogue between the playwright and artistic expression. As the reader-spectator engages with a drama, they simultaneously become a spectator of the arts, guided toward intellectual freedom. The interartiality of these works fosters a global convergence of ideas, forming the artistic ideal. A single word within the text can become the driving force behind the reader's thoughts, activating memory and conjuring images from various artistic creations. These associations help liberate the imagination, leading to the aesthetic emotion of reading. All works of art—regardless of the era or culture in which they were created—affirm their inexhaustible power. They serve as the eternal medium of communication among artists and the cohesive thread that unites nations.

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