

# Titus Maccius Plautus

Sometime around 254 B.C., in the tiny mountain village of Sarsina high in the Apennines of Umbria, ancient Rome's best-known playwright was born--Titus Maccius Plautus. Born "Plautus" or "splay-foot", he apparently managed to escape his backwoods village at a young age--perhaps by joining one of the itinerant theatrical troupes which commonly traveled from village to village performing short boisterous farces.

We know, however, that at some point the young Plautus gave up his acting career to become a Roman soldier, and this is probably when he was exposed to the delights of the Greek stage, specifically Greek New Comedy and the plays of Menander. Sometime later, he tried his hand as a merchant, but rashly trusted his wares to the sea and at the age of 45, he found himself penniless and reduced to a wandering miller, trudging through the streets with a hand-mill, grinding corn for householders.



Meanwhile, translations of Greek New Comedy had come into vogue and Plautus--who remembered the comedies of Menander from his days as a soldier in Southern Italy--decided to try his hand at writing for the stage. His earliest plays, *Addictus* and *Saturio*, were written while he still made a living with his hand-mill. Soon, however, his comedies began to suit the public taste and Plautus was able to retire his hand-mill and devote himself to writing full-time.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Plautus plays were no mere translation of Menander. He adapted the rough and tumble colloquy of the environments he knew best--the military camp and the marketplace--wild and boisterous like the Roman farces he may have performed in as a young man.

In those days, plays were never performed alone. They were presented at public celebrations and had to compete with chariot races, horse races, boxing matches, circuses, etc ... Since a close translation of a play by the refined Menander would hold little interest for a rowdy Roman crowd, Plautus quickly parted company with the Greek original. He generally took only the outline of the plot, the characters, and selected segments of dialogue--then stepped out on his own. His objective was to entertain. At all costs, he kept the pot of action boiling, the stream of gags and puns and cheap slapstick flowing. Anything to make the audience laugh and keep them from peaking in on the boxing

match nextdoor! To this end, Plautus often included scenes in song and dance. Unfortunately, the musical accompaniments to his plays have now been lost.

In all, Plautus composed approximately 130 pieces--21 of which have survived to this day. He was eventually granted citizenship and given permission to assume three names like a true-born Roman. The name he chose for himself was Titus Maccius ("clown") Plautus.

- *Amphitryon* • *Casina* • *Mercator* • *Pseudolus*
- *Asinaria* • *Cistellaria* • *Miles Gloriosus* • *Rudens*
- *Aulularia* • *Curculio* • *Mostellaria* • *Stichus*
- *Bacchides* • *Epidicus* • *Persa* • *Trinummus*
- *Captivi* • *Menaechmi* • *Poenulus* • *Truculentus*

Along with his younger Roman counterpart, Terence, Plautus kept Greek New Comedy alive for later generations of theatergoers.

Plautus' works have been adapted by many later playwrights. His *Amphitryon* was the basis for Giraudoux's *Amphitryon 38*. *Menaechmi* or *The Menaechmus Twins* inspired, among others, Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* and Rodgers' and Hart's *The Boys from Syracuse*. *The Pot of Gold* became Moliere's *The Miser*. And *Pseudolus*, *Casina* and several other plays were combined in Stephen Sondheim's *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*.

