

The beginning of an original dance in ancient greek comedy : the frogs who wanted to become swans (Aristophanes Frogs 209-220)

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In the first parodos of Aristophanes'frogs ( 209-265), an animal choir dances. Their function is to teach to Dionysos how to row a the boat to go across the Styx. Sailing is not easy in the Ancient greek word and Thucydides wrote that sailors needed experience. Rowing and keeping in the rhythm was very difficult and there was always a musician who played the aulos to give the sea-men the pace. The frogs' choir must work the same for Dionysos, but Dionysos does not like them and he does not like rowing. Why ? Is it because the rhythm of the frog is too difficult ? Or because the sounds of the frogs are too ugly ? Or because the frogs move with frenzy gestures in disharmony ? We will discuss the reconstruction of the dance, in a very little part of the parodos, v. 209-220. Then, we will try to answer the question of relations between the frogs and Dionysos.

## **I- Reconstruction of the frogs dance v. 209-220**

### 1- Choreography

The ancient greek iconography does not offer many representations of frogs and not any representation of an actor with a frog costume. We were inspired by the ring with a frog, gold from Megara Hyblea, Syracuse, Museo Archeologico (1) and the coins from Seriphos (around thirty representations, according to O. Picard) (2).

But in the text, there is not much for a reconstruction of the choreography. It is very different from the karkinos dance (Aristophanes' Wasps, 1518-1537) where the text gives a lot of indications (as « tachun poda kuklosobeite », « your quick foot, move it in circle » ; this movement is depicted on pyxis, Museum of Berlin Charlottenbourg, ca 575 BC). But the frogs speak about a kômos for Dionysos Nyseios. So we can imagine that the gestures of the kômos were used in this piece. We have used the representations of kômos (3), as laconian cup Tarentum 20909 (4), or skyphos University of California (Berkeley), 8/360 (5),

### 2- Rhythm

We don't have Aristophanes'music but only the text, which gives the rhythm of the choreography. We worked some elements of rhythm with Parker (6) : this is a trochaic and iambic rhythm, which can translate into 6/8 time, but there is also dactylo epitrites verses, which are closer dactylic rhythm (4/4 or 2/4 measures) We used Philippe Brunet's record (from Demodocos Theatre, Paris, France) to work on the rhythm, and after we tried to sing and dance at the same time, with the plaster mask

### 3- Voice

For the voice, we tried to imitate the croaks of several frogs, which live in Greece and particularly the *Rana ridibunda*. We were inspired in this research by authors (7) (8) (9). In v. 207 Aristophanes speaks about « batrachôn kuknôn thaumasta ». These words show that in this parodos the voice of the frogs is original : frogs who want to become swans, as C. Corbel Morana showed (10). So we did some research on the swans in Greece, but the only kind of swan, which nests in Greece, doesn't have as beautiful a voice as the other swans. So it was not necessary to have a perfect vocal quality in this parodos. We created frogs-swans, introducing some beautiful sounds in the croaks, to give a comical result

### 4-Costume and mask

We made our costume with a green piece of linen, draped as a frog. Then we made a mask. We know that the archeological masks that we can see in museum are in terracotta, bronze, stone, materials that are not good for dancing. All these masks are copies of the masks that were used in theatrical performance or ritual festivals. In Ancient Greece, first, the actors performed with a white facial make up then, the tragic poet Thespis created the mask in linen with plaster (11), and with openings for the eyes and the mouth (12), and maybe later, the masks were made of rags with stucco (13). We can perform with a plaster mask or a stucco mask if it is not too heavy (14). We can dance also with a simple mask, with a mask with a skullcap. We can use the megaphone of the mask but it is not easy.

## **II- Why the relations between the frogs and Dionysos are so bad ?**

### 1- Is the rhythm of the frogs too difficult ?

If we analyze the rhythm of the parodos we can see that it is complex and irregular : complex because it is not only simple iambic or trochaic rhythm. The verses 209-220 have already been studied and the scholars do not agree. If we follow L E P Parker, we have many different cola : lekythion, iambics and cretics metres, baccheios and iambic dipodie, tellesilian, and in 217-219 dactylo-epitrites. This is very complex. If we study only 209-216, we have six different rhythms and we can understand that Dionysos could not follow them all ! Rowing necessitates a very regular rhythm. But if we follow our experiment and Emmanuel Lascoux's remarks (15) (16), the frogs' choir dance cannot follow an irregular rhythm because it is too hard! He dances and sings at the same time, with a mask. He often runs out of breath. So, while he dances, he evens out the rhythm. So the rhythm created by the dance is steady and not too difficult for Dionysos.

### 2- Is the voice of the frogs disharmonic ?

Maybe Dionysos is afraid of the frogs horrible voices. The quality of the voice cannot be good because it is very hard to use the mask with sing and dance (17)

(18). This is comic for the public but not for Dionysos. The frogs want to become swans ; they imagine that they are swans. Cécile Corbel-Morana (19), showed that these frogs-swans were a parody of the poets of the new dithyramb. We know that Aristophanes does not like the new music of the end of the fifth century (20) and maybe the Dionysos of the frogs (who is an original god, one is afraid) is like Aristophanes. Even the frogs have beautiful voice when they imitate the swans, they cannot be perfect because the harmony of the swans is always destroyed by the croaks of the frogs. The voice of the frogs is disharmonic, because of its animal character. The music is not disharmonic for the public, but for Aristophane, it is, because he loved music more ancient and less sophisticated !

### 3- The gestures of the dance are disharmonic ?

The gestures refer to a komos dance, and maybe some movements can also parody war dances, because we know that Cinesias, poets of new dithyramb, composed some pyrrhic dances (21). We can imagine that the squat positions refer to kômos and to pyrrhic dance. For Plato, Pyrrhic was a beautiful dance but the komôs was, as the kordax, an unattractive dance (21) because the dancers limped. Aristophanes hated the new dithyramb, but he did not hate the kômos. And Dionysos liked the kômos which was a dance to celebrate him. So the kômos could not frighten him. So we must imagine that the frogs were unkind with Dionysos when they dance.

Dionysos cannot follow the lessons of her teachers the frogs, not because the rhythm is too difficult, but maybe because he does not like the harmonies of new dithyramb and the voices of the frogs-swans. He likes the kômos but he cannot appreciate the dance of the frogs, because the frogs are too malicious.

(1) Picture in P. Lévêque

(2) for example, a coin in Athens, Museum of numismatic Photo by MH Delavaud-Roux

(3) Study in Delavaud-Roux, Les danses dionysiaques en Grèce antique, Publication de l'Université de Provence, Aix-en-Provence, 1995

- (4) ca 540 BC, drawing by Agnes Irigoyen, Picture in P. Ghiron Bistagne, *Recherches sur les acteurs dans la Grèce antique*, Belles Lettres, Paris, 1976
- (5) end of Vth century BC, drawing by Agnes Irigoyen
- (6) L B Parker, *Songs of Aristophanes*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1997
- (7) A et C. Nöllert, *Guide des amphibiens d'Europe. Biologie, identification, répartition*, Paris Delachaux et Niestlé, 2003
- (8) Pierre Lévêque, *Les grenouilles dans l'Antiquité. Culte et mythe des grenouilles en Grèce et ailleurs*, éditions de Fallois, 1999
- (9) Cécile Corbel-Morana, *Le bestiaire d'Aristophane*, thesis approved en 2002 at University of Paris X (France) dir. by M. Casevitz
- (10) C. Corbel-Morana, p. 278-282
- (11) Souda, sv Thespis
- (12) P. Ghiron-Bistagne, recherches sur les acteurs dans la grèce antique, Les belles letters, Paris, 1976, p. 139
- (13) P. Ghiron Bistagne, p. 139
- (14) M-H. Delavaud-Roux « **Use of mask in the ancient theatrical greek dance** », *Dance in Antiquity, Antiquity in Dance* », *International Conference, University of Leiden, 23th-25th october 2008*, ed by F. G. Naerebout
- (15) M-H. Delavaud-Roux, « Musiques, rythmes et danses dans la parodos des Grenouilles d'Aristophane », *Actes du colloque international « Musiques rythmes et danses dans l'Antiquité »*, Brest, 29-30 septembre 2006, ed. par M. H. Delavaud-Roux (PUR, will be published in 2010)
- (16) M-H Delavaud-Roux, « Le chœur des Grenouilles est-il antiharmonique », *Damon*, XXII, 2-3 novembre 2007.
- (17) cf. Lucien, Peri Orcheseos, 30
- (18) Tite Live, VII, 2 (about Livius Andronicus)
- (19) C. Corbel Morana, p. 278-282

(20) A. Belis, Aristophane, grenouilles, v. 1249-1364 : Eschyle et Euripide, Μ Ε Λ Ο Π Ο Ι Ο , REG, 1991, CIV, p 31-51

(21) P. Ceccarelli, La pirica nell'antichita Greco romana. Studi sulla danza armata. Istituti Editoriali e Poligrafici Internazionali Pisa Roma, 1998, p 42-43, 87, 124, 202, 213, 221-222.

(22) Plato, Laws, VII, 814e-816e