

# **DRAMA** *Works*

**Plays Through Practice**

**LYSISTRATA**  
by  
**ARISTOPHANES**

**EXTRACT**

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# Extract

## WORKING THROUGH THE PLAY IN A PRACTICAL WAY

*From the beginning the exercises assume a knowledge of the story-line and what happens to the characters. It is important, therefore, that before you start the following work you will have read the play. At the very least, you should have read the plot synopsis that precedes this section.*

*I try never to be dictatorial in the practical work. There is no version that is more right or more wrong than another. What the following work hopes to encourage is the habit of experiment.*

*It is important that you also get in the habit of recording the results of all the work you do. At the end you will need to go through all your work once more, checking that your decisions make sense and are not contradictory.*

### THE SETTING

Performances happened in front of the skene or scene-building, from which there were three entrances. The conventions of the time allowed this background to be anywhere necessary to the play in a city or town placement. In addition, one side exit from the stage was believed to lead into the town, whilst the other led to the country. In this case, one leads into Athens and the other towards the countryside and Sparta.

There is no need for you to stick to this kind of convention now, though of course it is a choice. It has obvious advantages, allowing for a single setting throughout. In the play, this setting is in front of the Acropolis, which is the highest point of Athens, on a hill overlooking the rest of the City. An Acropolis is a fortified building. Thus, as mentioned in the play, it has ramparts above and a hefty gate behind which the women can defend themselves. In time of war, the Acropolis would be the last point of retreat into which survivors would barricade themselves so as to fight off their enemies for as long as possible.

However, designing this play for the twenty-first century allows you to place it anywhere in the world that you fancy. It will depend on your decision as to what political point you want to make with your production of the play. Perhaps it could be in Afghanistan, or Iraq. Perhaps you could keep it in an imaginary war-torn city which allows an audience to make its own connections.

Of course, the play makes serious points through the medium of comedy. The balance between the serious and the comical will be one of the decisions you will have to make quite early on. How hard-hitting do you want the play to be?

Have a preliminary discussion now, to kick-start your feelings about the play and the kind of approaches you want to make with it. You may find that you alter your ideas as you work in detail through it. At the end, you will need to put all these strands together.

**For some preliminary work, to inform your choices, divide the class up into small groups, pairs or individuals, as appropriate. Allocate an area for each section of the class to research, as follows:**

**Athens and the war with Sparta. Find pictures of the Acropolis**

**Afghanistan. Find pictures of Kabul. If possible, find a picture of a suitable building which could be 'taken captive' by the women**

**Any other war zones you wish to include. Once again find a representative building for each area, if possible. Of course, your research may not identify a particular building, but may identify the style of building.**

You may decide that the specific nature of much of the allusions in the play [to gods, weaponry, customs] makes it impossible to place it in a specific area, such as

Afghanistan, but you are reluctant to let go a pertinent political point. **Discuss whether it is possible to make such points in a more general way, to include all wars present and past. How could this be done? Consider:**

**a fantasy, futuristic setting which, with bright colours and space-agey buildings [and costumes] would take it out of a particular context and place it in a general area - anywhere, any time**

**a desert-type setting which is not specifically eastern or middle-eastern, but suggests any of these places. The building is a ramshackle affair, something between a trench shelter from World War One and a desert camouflage 'hole'. Stout-looking planks and pieces of metal block the entrance - or the entrance is blocked by a tank, perhaps, over which the women scramble, and which they have made secure by sheets of metal, or similar. Camouflage material is much in evidence**

**a fantasy Acropolis - that is, the outside of a building that is obviously Greek in style, or based on that, but made of metal, futuristic, with shimmering metal pillars and a metallic gate**

**again, a building based on the Acropolis, but clearly ravaged by war - pock-marked, surrounded by debris, a tattered flag, abandoned weapons. The gate is patched up, a large hole in its centre which is covered with uneven planks which slide apart**

**using a familiar building or landscape to set the play firmly in Britain.**

**building: This could be London in an imaginary future perhaps - the 10, Downing Street, or part of the Houses of Parliament, Buckingham Palace, or some such.**

**setting the play in this country but in a recognisable historical period, e.g. Britains against Romans [think Boudicca as an inspiration], the time of King John and Richard the Lionheart, the Civil War - Cromwellian Roundheads and Royalists, the Second World War in the Blitz - the building in this case a dug-out bomb-shelter.**

**I am sure you will think of more.**

**Give all of these ideas a thorough discussion before making a preliminary decision. Having done so, come up with a drawing, a plan of your stage set-up. Make sure it includes:**

**different levels [the play talks of ramparts above the door]; you might also want somewhere for the Men's Leader and Stratyllis to set themselves higher than their Chorus. Or you may want some of the Chorus to be able to stand higher than others - or some to be able to sit**

**places for people to sit or lie in the more intimate settings [these could be pieces of rubble perhaps, or you could decide to bring items on as was done in the original script]**

**plenty of space to accommodate a large number of cast**

**Using your studio space, plan out where the most essential areas will be - the door, any levels, entrances and exits. For the latter, you might want there to be a general 'rule', as there is in the original - this way is Athens, that Sparta. You need to fix these essentials so as to be able to work as a group within this framework every time you explore the text.**

## **LYSISTRATA & CALONICE - Pages 141-143**

If you are using a single setting, you may want to bring Lysistrata on from a neutral area. Consider her arriving from the auditorium, for instance. She then behaves as if she is the first to arrive in a pre-arranged meeting-place, before the Acropolis [or your decided building].

Lysistrata is a strong woman, but I think it is important that she is also attractive, or at least charismatic. She is a Boudicca [Boadicea] not a bossy W.I. type. By the end, she reaches almost god-like status, allied to Athena, patron goddess of Athens. Throughout she stands apart from the weakness and pettiness of the other women. Though she refers to 'our husbands', no husband of hers reveals himself in the play.

Though apart from the other women in stature, clear-thinking and morality, she is also quite able to swear and talk dirty like the others!

The opening sets the tone for the audience. Lysistrata talks to them intimately, on their level. **Experiment in your studio space with how close she should be to them.**

The shaking of tambourines, held high in honour of the gods, creates a hypnotic rhythm, designed to show to advantage graceful wrists and arms. Bacchus [the Latin name for Dionysus] is god of wine and fertility [therefore sex] and altered states [so also drama]. Pan is a god of nature and chaos [able to instil panic]; he is one of the followers of Dionysus/ Bacchus. Aphrodite is the goddess of love.

The speech thus sets the tone of the play. Women, Lysistrata is saying, would happily turn up for a celebration of any of these gods of sex and love and dance seductively in their honour. As the introduction explains, the ancient Greek idea of women was that they thought of nothing but sex. In Greek minds, the play thus gains strength for its cause; if women, so well-known to be sex-mad are able to give it up, then the necessity to stop the war with Sparta is given added weight.

**Try slightly differing tones for this speech:**

**annoyed but not very much surprised - sighingly resigned**

**really upset, fierce**

**bossily amazed that no one is here - she expects people to jump to her say-so**

**Any experimentation will help you work towards Lysistrata's character.**

**Lysistrata's greeting of Calonice will arise out of her mood. Try telling the audience 'No, here's my neighbour...':**

**with relief**

**still with resignation**

**with joy - one might mean the others will arrive too**

**and the greeting with:**

**frostiness - she's punishing Calonice for the absence of the others**

**pleasure born out of relief**

**rather lah-di-da - she looks down on Calonice**

**warmth - she likes Calonice and knows her well**

**Make sure that your decisions, run together, make sense.**

The fact that Lysistrata says that her neighbour is 'coming out' arises from the three doors usual in the back building of the skene. Calonice has emerged from the neighbouring door to that of Lysistrata. This will depend on your set of course. You can get round it by having both appear from the back of the auditorium, Lysistrata pointing up the aisle as she spots her neighbour. Or you can decide to have a Greek arena setting of course.

Calonice's greeting will be a response to that of Lysistrata. If she was greeted coldly, then she might respond with surprise or caution.

Read ahead up to the entrance of the other characters. What impression do you gain of Calonice? Discuss in groups or pairs, making a list in each group of the phrases in Calonice's speeches that help you come to your decisions. What class do you see her as? What clues are there to this?

**Try to the bottom of the first page with Calonice as:**

**a practical no-nonsense type of person - with, perhaps, a Northern accent if you can manage that**  
**a sophisticated socialite - very posh accent, drawn-out vowels, full of herself and full of a sexy languor**  
**older than Lysistrata, a Juliet's Nurse type - jovial, larger than life, hearty and full of the twinkle of laughter**

It has to be remembered that this kind of comedy cannot follow the rules of Naturalism when it comes to character. As in much comedy and satire, characters are not always consistent. Often the joke comes first. However, to make the play work, characters need to be contrasting and at least of a consistency when it comes to voice, status, demeanour.

Lysistrata listens to Calonice's list of women's duties at the bottom of the first page and cuts across it with her explosion: 'But dammit....'. [line 20] Cut off in mid-list Calonice would be taken aback. Try the top two sentences of Page 142 [lines 20-21] with a pause after Lysistrata's explosion for Calonice to eye her neighbour in astonishment. The look will be according to character - outraged, concerned, growing delight. The audience will need to see the thought drop into Calonice's mind - could it be a sexual experience that Lysistrata wants to relate to the others? The practical Calonice would treat the idea with a 'Tch tch' but indulgent raising of the eyebrows and shaking of the head. The sensual languorous Calonice would dwell on the idea with lip-licking delight. The large jovial Calonice would treat it as a nudge-nudge wink-wink comic joke.

Lysistrata is wrapped up in her own thoughts and does not 'get' the insinuation in Calonice's voice at first. 'the word 'meaty' must be used as a loaded clue, accompanied by relevant gesture if you like.

**Try Lysistrata's realisation speech, 'That's not what I meant...' [line 25]:**

**with a startled laugh and a brief enjoyment of the humour**  
**shock followed by a feeling of hopelessness**  
**a return to her anger**

**In all cases, the last line is serious. Try this line:**

**with fire and excitement in her voice, gripping Calonice's arm, sure of herself**  
**thoughtfully, quiet and serious**  
**anxiously, a hint of the desperation she feels - but she is not sure whether it'll really work.**

'Something pretty flimsy then....' answers Calonice. Is she still trying to be sexual? **Try the line:**

**as if it is a sexual joke - the phallus [or the man] having dwindled in Calonice's mind to tiny proportions**  
**snapping out of the sexual joke, anxious at Lysistrata's tone - trying for a different, rather tentative kind of laugh - accompanied by slight juggling motion of the hands perhaps**  
**disappointed, a slump of shoulders, rather flat tone - how could it be of any interest if the news Lysistrata wants to impart is not about sex?**

The Peloponnesians are the principal enemy, encompassing the kingdom of Sparta.  
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The Boeotians are another state which had been under Athenian rule but was now allied to Sparta; it lay, with the capital City-State of this region - Thebes, just above Athens. Many subject states of Athens had rebelled just before the writing of this play, leaving the Athenian City-State very vulnerable. Lysistrata stops short of voicing her fears for Athens - but they would be fears understood by many in the audience of that time: that Athens would be so weakened by so many rebellions from previously subject states and by the long war with Sparta that the neighbouring empire of Persia [roughly modern Turkey, Iraq and Iran] could simply sail in and take over.

Lysistrata's next few speeches, from 'Why, Calonice, we women have the salvation of all Greece...', [line 30] are fast paced. She is fired up, passionate. Perhaps she takes Calonice towards the front, looking her straight in the face, or holding her by the shoulders - anything that shows her fervent intentions. **Try this out, using your own words and for the moment leaving out Calonice's interjections. Concentrate instead on the latter's physical response. She could be:**

**taken aback, shown by leaning away from Lysistrata**

**listening kindly and going along with her**

**showing by her facial expression, slightly turned away from Lysistrata, that she is cynical, not taking her seriously at all**

**When Lysistrata gets to the last line 'But if all the women join together - not just us....' what she is saying finally gets through to Calonice and she is surprised into stopping her attitude.**

Eels are presumably a tasty dish imported from Boeotia. Can't see it myself, but times and tastes have changed!

**Try Calonice's speech: 'But how can women achieve anything...' [line 42] in your chosen characterisation, to test it out. If you have chosen a practical no-nonsense Calonice, it would still work - she'd say it glumly, resigned. She's saying it as it is; this is the same attitude as she would show for 'Then Greece hasn't much hope' earlier. Practical and jokey Calonice's would both mock the prevailing fashions of see-through [Cimberic] under-garments and 'giant slippers' - presumably a silly fashion-item, just as in Medieval times it was fashionable for men to have long extended points to their shoes which curled over.**

**To understand the correct tone for this [and to understand the silliness of the fashion] discuss briefly what crazy fashions you can think of. They may be historical or within the last fifty years [platform shoes, perhaps, could be one].**

The point is that slippers that you can't actually walk properly in emphasises the point that women just sit at home looking decorative but unable to do anything very useful.

Calonice, however you have decided on her as a character, has her heart in the right place. She is enthusiastic about the idea that women's looks and fashions can bring about peace, although she cannot see where Lysistrata is taking her argument.

**Try out the dialogue from 'But don't you see, that's exactly what I mean to use...' exploring the comedy in Calonice's interjected responses. If she's a blunt, square practical Calonice, or rather large, then her wincing as she vows to put herself in see-through garments and other silly fashions can be a source of comedy, aided by the inappropriateness of the idea of Calonice as a sex object.**

**A different sort of comedy would be achieved by a purring languorous Calonice who is already fashion-conscious. This Calonice is seeking to cap an addiction to clothes she already has. She might eye her already absurd slippers, toss them away and vow to get even more extravagant ones.**