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Aristophanes

1,175 Words

Comedy is probably one of the most favorite types of play to everyone. It is widespread across the globe due to its unique style of creating happiness to people. It could be said that comedy is the type of play that truly entertains everyone. It brings out laughter regardless of age, no matter whether you are an adult or you are a mere young child. The type of comedy that we are familiar with nowadays are commonly known as the “New Comedy”. As time passes by, comedy evolves. In this essay, we will be discussing about the person who contributed tremendously to Comedy. Comedy was once categorized as “Old Comedy” 446 BC, the era when comedy first appeared, the era of Aristophanes¹.

Dating back to ancient Athens, old comedy was popular among the citizen of Athens. At that time, old comedy was not simply about laughter. It involved certain circumstances in real life, for example, sarcasm of the politicians and philosophers. The person who was mostly renowned for this was absolutely no one but Aristophanes, the person who made this great contribution to our mankind.

There is inadequate evidence to when and where Aristophanes was born. The only information about him is that he lived in the ancient Athens. During his career life, Aristophanes wrote 40 plays in total and among these, 11 of them are still present

¹ Wikipedia Contributors. “Aristophanes”. En.wikipedia.org 12 Feb 2012
<<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aristophanes>>

and studied everywhere in our modern world². Undoubtedly, all his poets are considered a masterpiece to our mankind. Aristophanes was utterly a wise man with talent in language who could shape the language in the way he wanted it to be so as to convey his message to the people beautifully. Fortunately, there was no restriction in writing due to the recently begun Democracy³. As a result, Aristophanes was given freedom to write and express himself freely. Eventually, this led to his greatest contribution to our mankind. Aristophanes' writing concerning sarcasm of the government system and the politicians are the best elements which he had contributed to us.

It is believed that the fall of Athens is Aristophanes' preferred story of writing⁴. This is perhaps because he was tired of the unsatisfying work and decisions made by the government. As Aristophanes hoped to alter the society, he was motivated to condemn the government through his works. Nonetheless, Aristophanes' comedies were not only written to be read. Some of his comedies were played and acted by real person in an ancient theatre as well. With a play, Aristophanes would be able to deliver his messages to a larger group of people easily and more effectively. One politician whom Aristophanes constantly mentioned about in his writing was Cleon. Cleon was the man who ruled the power of Athens at that time. Thus, it is perceived that courage was the only thing that challenged Aristophanes to write about Cleon. Cleon had a tremendous impact on the people of Athens that they were all fearful of

² Wikipedia Contributors. "Aristophanes". En.wikipedia.org 12 Feb 2012
<<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aristophanes>>

³ Alfred Bates. "The Drama: Its history, Literature and Influence on Civilization, vol.2" Pg.7-16
<<http://www.theatrehistory.com/ancient/aristophanes001.html>>

⁴ Imagi-Nation Contributors. "Aristophanes" Imagi-nation.com 12 Feb 2012
<<http://www.imagi-nation.com/moonstruck/clsc13.htm>>

him. As a result, in the play called “the Knights”, there was no one brave enough to take on Cleon’s role⁵. With his strong will to personify his play, Aristophanes took on the role by himself. Additionally, apart from the play “the Knights”, some philosophers were also written sarcastically about in other plays. For example, Euripides, a writer whose plays were mostly associated with tragedy, was written about in “the Archarnians”, “Thesmophoriazusaes” and “the Frogs”⁶. Despite being one of the greatest philosophers, Socrates was also a character in “the Clouds”.⁷ From these examples of his work of art, it showed us the strong determination of Aristophanes who aimed to improve the government system meanwhile eliminating corrupted activities through his writing.

Apart from his comedies on the work of government, Aristophanes also wrote against war. He believed that the idea of solving the dispute through violence was erroneous and it should not be used to cease the problem. At that time, it was the Peloponnesian war that was going on between the Athenians and the Spartans. The war lasted from 431 to 404 BC which was 28 years in total.⁸ As expected from war, it resulted in massive destruction to both parties involved and more importantly, a large number of people were slaughtered cruelly in the war. Aristophanes illustrated his idea in one of his well-known play, “the Lysistrata”. The main content of the play was about the women of Athens, gathering together to protest against their husbands who fought in war. They were extremely depressed after having to witness the death of

⁵ Alice B. Fort & Herbert S. Kates. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1935. “Minute History of the Drama” p.20

⁶ Imagi-Nation Contributors. “Aristophanes” Imagi-nation.com 12 Feb 2012
< <http://www.imagi-nation.com/moonstruck/clsc13.htm> >

⁷ Frederic Harrison. “The New Calender of Great Men” 1920.

⁸ Wikipedia Contributors. “Peloponnesian War”. En.wikipedia.org 12 Feb 2012
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peloponnesian_War>

their own sons, one after another. Eventually, they became intolerant and decided to take an action against their husbands who brought about the war. The Athenian women refused to have any sexual intercourse with their husbands to demonstrate their unhappiness. Apparently, from this play, we could observe that Aristophanes was a wise man with sympathy for the Athenians. He tried to put an end to this long-lasting war through his profession, comedy writing. He wanted no man to die or suffer.

However, surprisingly, after all of Aristophanes' attempts to influence and alter the government system, he did not succeed. Cleon was still the most powerful person in Athens and some politicians continued their corrupted behaviors. His plays did not have any tragic effect on them. Additionally, his plays, "the Lysistrata", did not convince the people of Athens to stop fighting in war. In spite of his failures, his good intention was recognized. His great contribution was finally revealed to mankind, not in the past but in today's modern world. Aristophanes' plays provide us with all the insight information and ideas of how the society was like in the ancient Athens. It helps us to explore the past and the great people of that time. Furthermore, his writing allows us to study and gained more understanding of arts in the past⁹. On the other hand, since Aristophanes' plays were meant to be sarcastic, it shows us the other side of the coin. Unlike the written history, his plays reveal the other side of people and the society in the past, not just the heroic part. It substantially teaches us the thoughts and cultures of people. Therefore, it could be said that Aristophanes' remarkable literatures opened a new world to us who live in modern world.

⁹ Wikipedia Contributors. "Aristophanes: Influence and legacy" En.wikipedia.org 12 Feb 2012
< http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aristophanes#Influence_and_legacy>

Lastly, in summary, Aristophanes was not simply an ordinary comedy writer who wrote sarcasm on people in the past; he wanted to play a part in the society. He aimed to improve the life of people meanwhile eliminating their sufferings. Though his effort did not have a direct impact on the society as he hoped, it became one of the most reliable sources in which we study to gain more understanding about life in ancient Athens. There is no doubt that the history of ancient Athens which we learn today could partly come from Aristophanes' great work of art. All in all, Aristophanes had left a greater contribution to our mankind than what he had imagined.