

# Brill's Companion to the Reception of Aristophanes

*Edited by*

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## Classical Reception in Posters of *Lysistrata*: The Visual Debate Between Traditional and Feminist Imagery<sup>1</sup>

*Alexandre G. Mitchell*

In 411 BC, when *Lysistrata* was first performed, it was neither a feminist nor completely a pacifist play.<sup>2</sup> The Athenian playwright's politics have been debated for a long time, but he seemed to have been more interested in a comical male-female role reversal and an honorable ending to the Peloponnesian war than pacifism and gender equality. Yet these are the two interpretations that have driven most modern performances of the play. As James Robson writes, "These are probably best described as 'adaptations' of *Lysistrata*—works which, while inspired by Aristophanes, are recognizably distinct from the Aristophanic original."<sup>3</sup> And these "adaptations" fall perfectly within the remit of classical reception.

The play's reception has been studied from numerous angles (social, political, feminist, activist, etc.),<sup>4</sup> but not from what I would describe as an archaeological perspective. The aim of archaeology is to re-create the past through the study of material remains and their often limited context. Posters of modern plays are sometimes all that remains to offer a glimpse into past performances. Obviously these sheets of paper can hardly re-create the performances themselves, but their precise date and location, the immediacy of their message and visual cues, their powerful symbols, vivid colors and typography can help us rediscover the "take" on a play by a troupe or a director. A detailed study of posters enables us to re-create the reception of the play, how it was interpreted at a given time and place. I first described this approach regarding

1 I would like to thank Philip Walsh and Stavros Lazaris for their suggestions on improving this paper. All mistakes are my own.

2 As Gomme wrote, Aristophanes was "not a politician but a dramatist . . . whose purpose is to give us a picture . . . not to advocate a policy." See Walsh (2009) for a very subtle and balanced view of the debate. See also Revermann (2011) and Robson in this volume.

3 Robson (2009) 195.

4 For an overview of these different interpretations of the play and the reception of *Lysistrata*, see, for example, Hall and Wrigley (2007); and Stuttard (2011).

past performances when confronted with limited contextual information for a study of the Kabirion sanctuary in Boeotia (central Greece) dating back to classical antiquity.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, there was a sanctuary dedicated to Kabiros and Pais (attested by inscriptions), discovered in the late nineteenth century by German archaeologists. Hardly anything was known about these gods. Some remaining structures were uncovered dating from the Roman period but very little from the earlier Greek period to explain the presence of over 350 of the most vivid caricatures ever found on pottery in Greek art. The caricatures were stunning but unexplained. Through a number of comparisons between the sanctuary's evidence and other caricatures and parodies on Greek pottery found in Athens, I came to the conclusion that the God Kabiros was a local avatar for the well-known Dionysos, god of wine, celebrations and the upside-down world of carnival. I postulated the existence of a yearly carnival celebrated at the sanctuary. Indeed, it had occurred to me as to a number of other scholars that there is very little material or written evidence that enables us to reconstruct past performances, carnivals, and festivals. How could anyone imagine the pandemonium of the Notting Hill carnival one week prior to the event or one week later were it not for orally passed-on memories, film footage, and photographs?

Today, as in antiquity and throughout the middle-ages, we only have written evidence of carnivals or festivals if something went horribly wrong. Otherwise, these yearly events are so common that they are not worth writing about or setting in stone. This is but a metaphor with regard to the subject of posters of modern plays, but the archaeological method can help to re-create an aspect of *Lysistrata*'s theatrical performances over time. Indeed, setting aside filmed productions, performances are highly volatile in that the only remains of a play are textual adaptations, stage director's notes, a few newspaper clippings and—posters. For the sake of brevity and to exemplify this approach to classical reception, I will only discuss a small selection of posters from the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and France mainly from the last decade, among the hundreds that publicize *Lysistrata* and other plays by Aristophanes. Posters are a fascinating visual medium, whose main function is to publicize a performance (i.e., to sell a product by using appealing and well-known visual references both to attract theatre-goers and to convey the director's interpretation of the play). Indeed, if the design is successful, it will crystallize, in a Stendhal-like manner, the director's adaptation of the play, whether it be the vision of a traditionalist or that of a feminist.

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5 On the fleeting nature of performance for an archaeologist, see Mitchell (2009) 250–1.

After a rapid overview of the medium and the use of symbols and visual synecdoches, the paper will show that most posters fall into two main categories: 1) traditional representations of *Lysistrata*, which include references to peace, female refusal to engage in sex, and manipulative women, and which tend to reflect “mainstream” interpretations of the play; and 2) a whole range of feminist representations—from the objectification of women to the feminization of men. The constant visual references to classical antiquity will also be mentioned in passing as famed statues, vases, and temples are often transformed to suit the poster.

Posters have a relatively long history and are perfect mirrors of their time.<sup>6</sup> Posters were massively produced in the twentieth century with a plethora of functions, be it informational, propagandist, and a number of other categories with a lesser social impact: entertainment posters, theatrical performances, musical concerts, various exhibitions. The medium is a clever combination of words and images. The typography (i.e., the graphic expression of the words) is often as important as the actual written words and can convey a strong message in itself. The colors, composition on the page, and visual references must be striking and particularly well-chosen. The targeted viewers are often in motion or distracted, so the poster must catch their eye instantly and create an emotion. The compositions must anger, shock, arouse, surprise, or amuse the manipulated viewer.

### Signs, Symbols, and Synecdoches

Various signs, symbols, and visual synecdoches are used in posters of *Lysistrata* to refer to a number of concepts. Signs have a language of their own; they inform, oblige, warn, prohibit. For instance, the “no entry” sign, a round red sign with a white horizontal bar is internationally recognized as a prohibitory sign often placed at the exit ends of one-way streets. Used by L. Lamblin in a poster of a 2011 French production, **(b6)**,<sup>7</sup> it is cleverly integrated in the guise of a shield protecting a long-legged woman’s mid-section. Another similar sign, a circle or square box with a diagonal line usually indicates something

6 See Gallo (1974), Meggs (1998), Metzl (1963), Timmers (1998), and Weill (1985).

7 “I chose to use black and various shades of orange as a reminder of Greek vases. The red comes mainly from the sign ‘no entry’ because if it was in a different color, it would not be identifiable. The background contains the red in darker tones, to refer to the bloody war and, graphically, to avoid a multitude of colors in the poster. The character is very large as a theater poster should be legible from a distance!” (personal correspondence with the designer).

is forbidden. Another poster, (d9), produced for a performance of *Lysistrata* at the Burton Street Theatre in Darlington in 2004, shows such a sign with the word “SEX” barred in a circle pinned like a small emblem, on the beret of a female version of the iconic and revolutionary Che Guevara. In poster (d5) another sign, resembling a “STOP” sign, in white lettering on a red background, states “NO SEX,” on the upper arm of a “Rosie Riveter” look-alike.

Another sign for forbidden or cancelled is the x-cross, which ironically also “marks the spot,” a visual double-entendre in which poster designers often indulge. In (d2), which publicized a 2011 French production, the designer places an X-cross over a Barbie-doll’s crotch.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly the cross seems to be made of the kind of tape usually marked with a repeated word like “Fragile” in red letters on a white background found on parcels. The words, in French, *En grève*, mean “on strike,” and are repeated at least five times, the kind of words one would certainly not find on a parcel. Another poster, (b7), illustrating a production in Columbus, Ohio in 2013, shows a woman naked from the waist up, trying to modestly cover her breasts with her hands, one of which holds a dove (a symbol for peace). Just like ancient statues of Aphrodite, it is unclear whether the poor attempt to cover her breasts is a sign of modesty or a form of sexual enticement, especially as her lower garment seems to be sliding off her hips.<sup>9</sup> The crossed arms, however, clearly indicate that sexual favors are out of the picture. A poster by Redbat design for a 2004 performance in Oregon (b4) places an X-cross over a woman’s mini-skirt roughly over her crotch. This poster uses only white for the lettering and red, black, and grey for the woman, her dress, and the background. The red cross comes off the page but is in perfect unison with the red background and the shape of the cross with a longer leg, a counter-point to the woman’s contrapposto posture. Finally, (b5), a poster by Bryan Smith for a production in 2012 by Colorado University Denver Theatrical Productions, is a simple but very efficient design that shows two tiny soldiers on either side of a giant female body made up of two wavy outlines showing the hips, waist, and breasts. Two large facing crested helmets further delineate the breasts while a third tiny frontal warrior holds two crossed spears, a sign for a no-go area. These spears outline the woman’s inner thighs and transform the small defending warrior into a crotch.

The circular sign with three lines within it was first used in a British Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament by Eric Austen in 1958, and has since been widely used as a sign for peace. The sign has been adapted in various ways by poster designers. On (a1), a poster by Dan Shearn for a Core Theatre

8 See the cover of Stuttard (2011), where this is graphically shown by a yellow tape.

9 Havelock (1995) 36.

production in Bath in 2005, the sign, in pink, is placed, like a tag or graffito, on a drawing of a female classical statue's face among other peace mottos discussed further. On (a4), a poster by designer Anna Elizabeth for a production by the Onomatopoeia Theatre Company in 2011, the sign is placed on one of the lenses of a woman's spectacles (the other is covered with a love-heart), as if to say, "she sees life through loving and peaceful glasses." The poster conveys perfectly the adaptation, a modern-day *Lysistrata*, an American idealist who occupies Wall Street with her female friends to try to find a way to save America from itself. On (a5), a poster made for a 2015 theatrical production by the Newfangled Theatre Company of the Department of Performing Arts of North Dakota State University, the sign takes the poster's entire width and three-quarter of its length. Orange and beveled, it looks almost like a slice of orange on the edge of a cocktail glass. The deep pink background and purple female silhouette of a club dancer wearing stilettos and a tight mini skirt leaves us with the impression that this is an evening show for an adult crowd. Also, the apposed red-lipstick lips on the "L" of *Lysistrata* in the title makes the "L" look like a straw.

The next poster, (b3), for a 2009 Canadian production by the Théâtre à l'Ouest, Théâtre au Pluriel and the AUFSJ in Alberta, is one in a few perfect compositions that combine all the elements of the play at a glance. A red bra is hanging from a downturned machinegun. The cups of the bra are not held by a piece of fabric called a center front gore, but by a Yale padlock. The key in the padlock has a chain with a small but immediately recognizable badge, the "peace sign." The interpretation of the poster is almost mathematical. The only key to open the padlock that keeps the bra together is held by peace, and the tantalizing bra, the promise of future pleasures, keeps the machinegun from firing. The last poster I wish to present that uses the peace sign is (e6). Designed by Okhan Orhan for a 2012 production by the Canadian Dawson Theatre Collective in Quebec, the poster includes a sign that is tattooed on the back of a giant woman's calf, one leg stating "NO PEACE" with the peace sign, and the other "NO SEX" with the sign for love-making. To ensure the viewer identifies these signs as tattoos, the artist added two incongruous Chinese-looking scroll designs on each leg next to the inscriptions.

Symbols are similar to signs, but their impact is far greater in that they represent important concepts. The Canadian poster (b3) discussed earlier displayed a beautiful and effective ensemble of intertwined symbols: the machinegun actually means "War"; the lock and key mean "Permission" or "Prohibition"; and the bra, "Sex" and "Seduction." A large number of our posters are peppered with symbols because of their immediate impact and simplicity. Each symbol is carefully chosen to be understood by most viewers and viewers in a hurry.



We have seen signs for peace, but there are a great number of symbols for peace. I will focus on three main symbols: the olive branch, the dove, and references to 1960s peace movements. An olive branch is held by the female warrior with a “no-entry” shield we have already described above (b6). It is a particularly appropriate symbol for peace as it comes from Greece itself and was an attribute of Eirene, the goddess of Peace.<sup>10</sup> Peace is also conveyed by a dove holding an olive branch in its beak or the dove on its own. This popular motif originates in the Jewish bible (Genesis 8:11), but the peace meaning was promoted by early Christians.<sup>11</sup> As doves were Aphrodite’s sacred birds in antiquity, their presence in these posters about a Greek play could be an added if unintentional layer of meaning. For instance, (a2), a poster designed by Bruce Mackley in 2004 for *Lysistrata 2411 A.D., The Musical Comedy*, displays a white dove seated on a naked statuesque woman’s lap, covering her crotch. The meaning of the poster is clear: peace can only be found in one place. (b7), mentioned above, shows a seductive pasty-white skinned woman holding a distinctive light blue and white dove against her breast. The dove’s head is turned towards five spears pointing at the woman from below as if to confront them, peace overcoming war. The other main references to peace are visual references to the 1960s and well-known peace movements like the flower power movement. Poster designers refer to the latter in a number of ways: through famous mottos like “make love not war” found in the form of a graffito in (a1). Flowers are often used in reference to the flower-power movement. For instance, the graffito in (a1) where the pink flower around the female statue’s eye looks almost like a black-eye, (a3) where flowers are omnipresent and even in the text: “*Lysistrata*, the ultimate flower power.” The Sock Puppet Guerilla Theater mounted this 2013 Washington production of *Lysistrata* by setting it in 1969.<sup>12</sup> And another poster, (d2), uses a wall-paper background with a repetitive floral pattern. The 1960s are also conveyed by psychedelic colors, shades of pink, purple, orange, and designs as in (a3). The very fat and

10 As is often seen in Roman coinage, but also in earlier literature: see Aristophanes, *Peace* 205ff. “... the greatest of all goddesses, her to whom the olive is so dear.” See also Virgil, *Georgics* 2.425ff.

11 An interesting conflation of both themes is found on a gravestone dating about 500 AD from the San Callisto Catacomb, Rome (Italy). It shows a dove bringing an olive branch to a figure next to whom is written EIRHNE.

12 The play was directed by Jaki Demarest, who offered the following comments on the 1960s: “it felt like the world was coming to an end—yet there was also a sense of real optimism to the age. Passionate activism ... the last time there was actually a sense that the actions of a few people could change the world for the better. That a song or a symbol like a flower in a gun could win hearts” (Demarest (2013)).

rounded typography typical of the 1960 titles is also used to recall the period in (a1) where the entire poster is written in that font-style. Interestingly, the origin of this typographic style is found in much earlier, 1900s posters by Alphonse Mucha.

As described above, a poster must have an immediate impact, be informative, catch the viewer's eye, and say everything at a glance. Signs, symbols, and visual synecdoches are not only useful, but they are also necessary. Visual synecdoches are understood as a *pars pro toto*, a part to say the whole. They are not always as effective as signs and symbols as they might be confused with symbols. For instance, in the absence of a female body, a bra (b3, e3), tights/suspenders on an extended leg (c3, c4, c7), or high heeled boots/shoes (c3, c4, e4, e5) can mean "woman," but in some cases, a locked bra can indicate the tantalizing power of forbidden sex, and a dancing female silhouette holding a bra (a3) on a poster of *Lysistrata* 1969 means sexual liberation and freedom rather than "woman."

Similarly, a helmet can mean "man" or "soldier" (c1) when men are not present in the scene. And references to war and weapons are found in many posters. Ancient weapons like swords are often purposefully confused with a male penis if held at the waist. (b1), a 2013 poster by designer Shayna Pond for a production by the University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma's theatre arts department, shows a male warrior holding his sword towards a woman in classical attire. His sword is far longer than it should be. The comic confusion between a sword's sheath and a female's vagina was certainly known in antiquity,<sup>13</sup> and the ambivalent correspondence between swords and penises is quite obvious in most scenes of Menelaus pursuing Helen at Troy on Greek vases in which the hero either holds his sword horizontally from the waist or drops it at the sight of his unfaithful but seductive wife.<sup>14</sup> Incidentally, there is a passage in *Lysistrata* itself where Aristophanes plays on both meanings of ξίφος.<sup>15</sup> Spears, helmets, and shields are also present, but modern weaponry is ubiquitous, including machineguns (b3, c2), bomber planes (b10), and modern military clothing (e4, e5).

13 On κολεόν ("sheath"), see Aristaenetus *Rhetor* 2.6; and Henderson (1991) 138.

14 Mitchell (2009) 101; 131; 142, fig. 43.

15 On ξίφος ("sword"), see *Lysistrata* 156, where Lampito describes how Menelaus dropped his sword at the sight of Helen's breasts; and Henderson (1991) 122.

### Traditional Imagery

What I consider to be traditional imagery, however original or striking a poster might be in other ways, consists in a typically non-feminist iconography that conveys conventional interpretations of the play. Three categories stand out: 1) the female refusal of all men's advances; 2) women coming between groups of men; and 3) manipulative seducers of men.

The first category does not include any images of empowerment or confrontation, only women refusing men's advances. How is this conveyed visually? We have already seen two signs, the "no entry" prohibitory sign and the ambivalent "X"-cross sign which indicate a refusal without any confrontation. There are at least three other visual cues. The first is padlocks. We described earlier one padlock (**b3**) which had a peace sign attached to its key, but the other two are far more interesting as they are attached to chastity belts. One poster (**b2**), designed for a 2012 French production, "L'Atelier theatre" from the Université du Maine in Le Mans, displays a female body wearing a chastity belt. The image has a medieval feel to it, resembling the small sculpted figures that enliven the front porches of gothic cathedrals. It is quite telling and appropriate for an illustration of *Lysistrata* that this woman should hold the key to her own belt. Another poster, (**b1**), shows a woman wearing a kind of chastity belt made of skimpy *chiton* secured with a padlock. The second visual cue consists in turning her back to a man, a clear gesture of disinterest and a clear non-verbal means of stating one's refusal to engage with another. On (**b9**), designed for a Syracuse University Boar's Head Theatre production of *Lysistrata* in 1954, the woman in classical dress is literally walking away from an entreating soldier in full garb, whereas on the poster we have discussed above, (**b1**), the woman is only turning her head away from the man's advances. The third visual cue is the "stop" gesture (i.e., a raised open-palm hand). It is an alternative to the "no entry" and "X"-cross signs and is a clear indication of refusal. The woman wearing a chastity belt on poster (**b1**) raises her hand at an advancing soldier, whose sword is elongated to resemble an erect penis, an allusion to the enormous phalli often worn by male actors performing this play.

A well-known poster (**b8**) designed by Kirsten Ulve for the 2011 Broadway musical *Lysistrata Jones* shows a woman, wearing a blue and white dress decorated with Greek meanders, doing the same gesture. The whole take of that adaptation on the original play is far from being conventional. In this musical, cheerleaders go on a sex-strike to encourage their university's basketball team, "the Spartans" (shown dribbling in formation), to improve their appalling athletic performance. The gesture is also clearly shown on the 1954 poster, (**b9**), and on an unusual poster, (**b10**), by designer Christina Sund for 2015

Cambridge performance of *Lysistrata* set in the 1940s. On the latter, the silhouette of a naked woman makes the stop gesture at a naked man holding his hands in his back while a squadron of at least seventeen airplane bombers fly above them. The chosen cubist style and colors for the skyline and background are reminiscent of World War I, but the bombers would date back to World War II. The poster is, in fact, inspired from a famous World War II poster, (b11), entitled “Women of Britain—Come into the Factories” (1941), by Philip Zec, encouraging women to engage into the war industry for the good of the nation. The poster shows a woman with open arms while numerous fighter planes seem to leave the factory. The same number of planes, drawn the same way and in the same perspective, are reproduced in the *Lysistrata* poster. Also, the black hill the two characters are standing on corresponds to the black background to the text of the propagandist 1941 poster. Thus, the *Lysistrata* poster has in fact parodied the design of a poster encouraging the war effort among women to put forward an entirely different message: a resounding female “NO” to war. Another poster, (b12), by designer Andi Best for a production by the University of Bournemouth’s Theatre and Dramatic Arts department in 2008, is also inspired by Philip Zec’s poster. The artist has given a light pink touch to the poster with Greek meanders on either side and cleverly transformed the “black hill” into the Acropolis. A temple is clearly visible at the top of the hill. The woman is half naked with flowing hair and two peaceful doves place fig (?) leaves on her nipples.

The second category of traditional imagery consists in women coming between men. The sex-strike motif is not obvious in those scenes. Women seem to be the ones brokering a deal between warring men. This category of images is well-known since Norman Lindsay illustrated *Lysistrata* in 1924.<sup>16</sup> The famous cover of this book was probably inspired from Jacques-Louis David’s famous painting, *The Intervention of the Sabine Women* (1798), in which the central female figure with arms wide apart attempts to stop her male family members from killing each other.<sup>17</sup> In addition to (b5) and (c1), both described above, one elegant poster, (e3), designed by Amy Watt for a production of the play in 2012 by the Edinburgh University Classics Society, shows two dueling warriors preparing to strike at each other when a giant red bra comes between them. The designer comments on her website that “The bra in-between the fighting men represents the oath of abstinence that the women took to stop

16 For more on Lindsay’s illustrations, see Walsh (2008) 193–4.

17 Paris, Musée du Louvre, 3691. See Rosenblum (1989).

the war.”<sup>18</sup> The outline of the Parthenon on the Acropolis is easily recognizable in the background.

The third category of traditional imagery concerns seductive women. This typical female stereotype undermines the nature of the play. Rather than showing the women's strength in opposing men and occupying the Acropolis, these posters focus on manipulative women who use their seductive powers to toy with men. In the original play, men were reduced to their primal selves, driven by one shared vulnerability, their need for sex. But some posters insist on the way women act upon this vulnerability in an almost devious form of manipulation. Covert aggression, or manipulation, can take many guises, but generally includes ruthlessness, concealment of one's real motives, and knowing the victim's psychological vulnerabilities to choose the most effective tactics.<sup>19</sup> These images are almost demeaning to women in presenting them as wolves in sheep's clothing, gaining trust and access to innocent and unsuspecting victims they have seduced. In (c1), a mock-up poster designed by Ruiya in 2004, a dancing woman is seen through a door keyhole. She holds the key to the door over her head and winks at the viewer. We are far from the proud Lysistrata and closer to a woman enticing a peeping Tom. In (c3), a clever pastiche of an Attic red-figure vase painting designed by Okhan Orhan in 2012 for the Canadian Dawson Theatre Collective production, shows in the foreground a woman putting on tights being gawked at by a warrior who seems to be about to drop his spear.<sup>20</sup> We find a similar close-up of a woman's legs in (c4), a black-white poster by designer Jonalyn Recto for a 2006 production by the Hampton Players at Hampton University in Virginia, with enough details to identify a dominatrix (e.g., shiny black stilettos, silky tights, whip, and black gloves). Yet another woman's leg in suspenders and tights is shown on (c7), a poster designed by Michele DiMuzio for *Lysistrata the Vaudeville*, a New York production by the Musical Theatre Factory in 2015, where interestingly the entire image is made to look like a mosaic. Just as the parody of a Greek vase (c3) was a way to rekindle with the classical past, using a mosaic background is a visual cue for “antiquity.”<sup>21</sup>

18 Watt (2012).

19 See Bjorkqvist (1994).

20 This poster was finally rejected, and another, (e6), was chosen instead.

21 These images may be inspired by the iconic 1967 *The Graduate* movie poster which shows a young Dustin Hoffman gawking at Anne Bancroft's leg (Linda Gray's as it turned out) rolling on a stocking. There are a number of other posters of Lysistrata on the same theme: e.g. a similar poster for a performance of *Lysistrata* in 2014 at the Storre Theatre presented by the SPIN Theatre Company, Luther College, Iowa.

Probably the most striking and successful illustration of a dangerous woman striking the sensual pose is (c6), a poster designed by the company designarmy for a 2009 production by Georgetown University Theatre and Performance studies, in collaboration with Synetic Theater in Washington, DC, in which a nude woman is drawn as if she were made of barbed-wire. She crosses her legs, wears platform high heels, throws her long hair back, and presses her hands behind her down on a surface (on the title, *Lysistrata*) to push out her chest. To say that this woman is prickly would be an understatement. Another poster, (c8), designed for a 1994 production for the Babcock theatre, Sweet Briar College in Virginia, parodies two famous Hellenistic sculptures simply by positioning them in an unusual and comical fashion. The original bronze *Boxer at Rest* from the National Museum of Rome is seated, looking to his right and upwards.<sup>22</sup> In the poster, he is positioned in the foreground, looking left and upwards to a towering Venus of Milo in the background.<sup>23</sup> Her breasts are covered by the title *Lysistrata*. The meaning is clear: a subdued fighter and a glorious and victorious naked breasted goddess. Choosing a statue with no arms, however, may not have been the most judicious decision.

However, two recent posters go far beyond all other images of seducers. The first, (c2), a poster designed for the University of Western Australia's French Club, at the Dolphin Theatre in 2015 and performed in French, literally shows a silhouette of a female puppeteer, holding a male lifeless, crucified puppet with her strings surrounded by other tiny male soldier silhouettes in front of a cut-out façade of the Parthenon in flames. The second, (c5), a poster designed by Harry Twigg for a 2015 production by Theatrical Niche Ltd, shows a very elegant and seductive woman playing chess. The text on the poster reads as follows: "One woman's battle to end the Peloponnesian war. The only weapon she has is sexuality . . . but she knows how to use it." Interestingly, the performance also includes puppetry.<sup>24</sup> These last two posters really insist on the manipulative nature of women who use sex as a commodity, or a means to an end, rather than a pleasurable end.

22 Rome, National Roman Museum (Palazzo Massimo alle Terme), 1055.

23 Paris, Louvre Museum, Ma399.

24 As Twigg explains, "We staged an outrageous and visually stunning new production to incorporate physical comedy, puppetry and of course—mask work" (Twigg (2015)).

### Feminist Imagery

In contrast to the last category, feminist propaganda has taken over numerous performances of *Lysistrata* and thus the posters publicizing these performances too. Some posters make overt direct references to feminist activist movements, like the slick French poster, (d3), by Sidonie Guiton (photography) and Sébastien Quencez (design) for a 2013 production by Théâtre Exalté and the drama school *Arts en scène*, which shows the backs of three women, wearing jeans and naked from the waist up. Their backs are covered in slogans: the first one reads “History is Her Story too,” the second “WAR” (crossed-out), and the third “Crossed legs movement.” The first slogan “History is Her story too” could be a reference to “Herstory,” a 1960s neologism with a false etymology based on “history,” coined by Robin Morgan to critique conventional historiography and encourage historians to write history from a woman’s perspective and to emphasize the role of women in history. The last slogan is particularly fascinating as it is a real case of *Lysistrata* in action, when the women of a small town called Barbacoas in Columbia went on a sex-strike, known as the *crossed legs movement*, in 2011 after years of campaigning with the central government to pave a road linking their town to the rest of the province.<sup>25</sup> But the immediate visual reference in this poster is to FEMEN, the radical feminist protest group originally founded in Ukraine in 2008 and now based in Paris, which became famous for organizing controversial topless protests with black writing on their breasts and backs, promoting “sextremism to protect women’s rights.”<sup>26</sup> The *Lysistrata* poster shows them turning their backs, probably to avoid shocking the general audience, unlike FEMEN activists.

One image which is often re-used and transformed by feminist activists is the Westinghouse “We can do it” poster, (d4), often mistakenly referred to as the “Rosie the Riveter” poster, after the iconic World War II “Rosie the Riveter” character.<sup>27</sup> This poster, created by Pittsburgh artist J. Howard Miller, was an American wartime propaganda poster produced in 1943 to boost worker morale among the employees of the Westinghouse company. The poster was hardly seen in the 1940s, but it was rediscovered in the 1980s and re-used by advocates of women’s equality in the workplace and since then by feminists worldwide. This last interpretation of the poster is the inspiration for the *Lysistrata* posters (d5), (d6), and (d7). The meaning of the woman’s gesture in the original poster is clear: she is pulling up her sleeve to get down

25 See Montes (2011).

26 See Holman (2013).

27 See Kimble and Olson (2006).



to work ("We can do it"), just like in the "classicized" poster (d7), designed Josh Levitas for *The Lysistrata Project*, a 2013 Simpatico theatre production. But in (d5), a poster designed for a 2009 production by The Orange Coast College Theatre Department, the woman is wearing a classical sleeveless female dress, and in (d6), a poster by Katie Metz for a show performed by Acting Out at Northeastern University in 2013, she is wearing a sleeveless bustier dress. The woman's gesture could be understood as something entirely different as she has no sleeves to pull up. Her arm is bent in an L-shape, with the closed fist pointing upwards, while the other hand grips the biceps of the bent arm. This is a widely known obscene gesture with the same meaning as giving the finger. In Italy and France, the middle finger of the bent arm is also raised to add emphasis to the gesture called in French *un bras d'honneur*. The gesture is known as "under the arm" in the UK and "giving the arm" or the "Italian salute" in the US. Could Lysistrata be giving the finger to men or war? (d8), a poster created for Charles Sturt University (CSU) Cycle Productions and the School of Communication & Creative Industries which produced an adaptation of the play in Bathurst in 2014, is a photograph of the stage performance, which, according to the subheading, is "An ancient Greek comedy set in a cabaret style of 1940s wartime." The three actresses look like Rosie the Riveter, but the lineup of the three smiling characters in a diagonal resembles Chinese propaganda posters of the 1960s promoting the so-called cultural revolution, something that was probably unintended by the poster designer.

Something feminists rightly criticize still today is the medium's constant objectification of women, and Mattel's Barbie dolls are often criticized as examples of this objectification. Young girls who play with Barbie dolls are really being told that having a certain kind of beauty and body type is what matters most. It should not come as a surprise that Barbie dolls are (ab)used in a 2011 French adaptation of *Lysistrata*, by the company Déclic Théâtre, with two different posters as the play was performed number of times between 2011 and 2013. (d1) shows the main actress holding a Barbie doll dressed in a *chiton* and two huge pigtails as if it were a flag pole or a standard, and brandishing it up close to the viewer's face. The advertising for this 2013 performance reads as follows: "And, in order to represent the assembly of women on one side and the warriors on the other, all one needs is a man, a woman and "puppets," or rather dolls, contemporary symbols of a certain ideal, Barbie and Ken, brandished by the actors, will finally have their say!"<sup>28</sup> The original poster, (d2), shows a nude headless and limbless Barbie doll which looks like a dislocated or broken puppet. The meaning of the poster is to break conventional objectifying imagery

28 Déclic théâtre (2011), my translation.



of women with the added humor of the *en grève* sign already discussed above, which further commoditizes the object as a “fragile” and broken image.

The final poster to be discussed in this section, (d9), designed a play performed at the Burton Street Theatre in Darlington in 2004, portrays a female version of the iconic photograph taken by Alberto Korda on March 5, 1960, of the Latin-American revolutionary Che Guevara. The poster reads: “The war of the sexes, Greek style. A classic comedy about the two things men hold most dear: war and sex. And what women hold even dearer: peace.” The focus here is on a war of the sexes, and less so on achieving peace. This is why we find such revolutionary references and particularly the visual homage to Che Guevara: the female struggle is compared to that of the famous revolutionary who fought as an underdog against the establishment in Cuba and throughout South America. Maybe the designer’s intention was to present women’s struggle against an all-male establishment like Che Guevara’s revolution of the masses against oppressive regimes. Korda’s photograph only became iconic in later years, after the publisher Giacomo Feltrinì used this picture in trying to raise awareness about the revolutionary’s impending execution. After his execution in 1967, people rallied throughout the world brandishing Che Guevara’s photograph or pop-art versions of it. The bright white female face in the drawing looks far more like a mask than a real face and the seriousness of the Che (he was at a memorial service when the photograph was taken). His faraway gaze and his everyday man’s beret are all lost in this poster where the woman is wearing eye liner and eye shadow, smiles, and wears lipstick, as a counterpoint to the red background. The designer had to make hard choices, and the play is no tragedy after all.

Contemporary feminists are far more goal-oriented than in the past. Today their main focus is to obtain equal rights at work and empowering disenfranchised women at every echelon of society. In the past, in the turmoil of a veritable war of the sexes, there may have been some confusion between the need to empower women and the temptation of overpowering men. In Aristophanes’ original play, women were not really shown overpowering men. However, a great number of posters promote this interpretation of Lysistrata’s followers. Rather than empowering women it produces a mixed-message, closer to caricature than engaged feminism. For instance, on (e1), the 1995 poster of a performance of the play at King’s College London, a schematically drawn naked woman in white is crushing with her foot a nude man drawn in red, wearing a helmet and groveling belly down in the dirt, at the foot of the Acropolis. The fallen warrior seems to be struggling to rise, pushing himself up with one arm from the ground and a foot in the air. The play was performed in ancient Greek, but this deeper knowledge of the original play did not curb the visual

impression given by the poster. A poster with a similar meaning, (e2), designed for a 2011 adaptation produced by The Boise State University Theater Majors association (TMA), shows two men in plain-colored loincloths bowing all the way down to the ground on either side of an exulting woman, standing higher than her male subordinates and shouting for joy with her arms erect above her head in a bright red dress. The poster is visually arresting, but the point of the original play seems to have been “missed” once again: it was not to crush men but force them to agree to women’s peaceful terms. At the end of the play, she recedes as the men agree to peace and then drink and party.

The easiest way of showing men crushed by women is to draw them in different sizes, like the puppeteer we already described in (c2), or the cleverly drawn large woman in (b5) with just a few elements coming between two tiny soldiers. The poster of the Broadway musical *Lysistrata Jones*, (b8), shows a girl as tall as the entire poster making a stop sign with her hand at a tiny team of basketball players/soldiers. We have also seen the poster (e3) in which an enormous woman drops her very visible red bra between dueling men. *Size matters*, and gigantism is even better. The next three posters show Godzilla-like gigantic women crushing men.

One poster, (e4), designed for a 2009 production by Phare Play Productions at the Wing Theatre in New York, shows a giant pair of bright red stars and stripes vinyl boots about to crush one man and six tiny toy soldiers who seem to make entreating gestures. The subheading reads “In the battle of the sexes, who ever said women played fair?” Everything about the poster is militaristic, even the typography, which is the one used in army dog tags. The platform boots decorated with the US flag about to knock down the tiny plastic men are incongruous, but they really mock warring men who play with toy soldiers as boys and continue to play war as grown men. It is unfortunate that the adaptation’s contemporary political undertones are not conveyed in the poster—i.e., the women of *Lysistrata* withholding sex until the parties can finally agree on a healthcare plan to unify Greece. The crushing boot is replaced by high heels on another poster, (e5), for a *Running with Scissors* production of the play performed in 2003 at the Viaduct Theatre in Chicago. The footwear has changed, but the effect is the same: a long sexy leg in tights and high heels, about to crush the Parthenon and a tiny soldier in a full modern military outfit, wearing a helmet and about to throw a grenade at the giant leg. The poster designer made the entire poster in different shades of pink, to give it a “girly” feel, including the lettering for the title of the play. The contrast between the colors, the lettering, and the tiny bow on the open shoe with the fact that the shoe is about to crush a soldier is effective. Finally, (e6) is the only poster that actually shows half a giant woman rather than just a crushing foot

or leg, towering over a tiny Parthenon, which reads “make love not war” written on a white sheet hanging from the *tympanon*. She is taller than the Eiffel tower, the television tower in Berlin, and other famous skylines shown in silhouette in the background. The inspiration of the poster might be the numerous Godzilla movies or the more straightforward low-budget 1958 movie *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman* produced by Bernard Woolner for Allied Artists Pictures, which has attracted a cult following, but clearly its stunning poster is far more famous than the movie itself.

The one poster that goes all the way—that is beyond overpowering and crushing men—is (e7), which shows a full role-reversal and feminization of a warrior. This hilarious poster, designed for *Lysistrata* (*la grève du sexe*), produced by the Zéfiro Théâtre company in 2005 at the Parisian Théâtre 13, shows a neo-classical statue (possibly of seventeenth- or eighteenth-century French origin?) of a warrior with a luscious beard, maybe Mars the god of war, putting on tights. If this was not surprising enough, the really incongruous element is his pink and white spotted women's briefs.<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusion

The array of visual cues and references used by poster designers in publicizing performances of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* is simply staggering. Only forty posters have been referred to in this paper out of a huge number of illustrations of *Lysistrata* and other plays by Aristophanes.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, these few posters convey almost every possible interpretation of the play from the more traditional themes to the latest feminist movements. Most of these posters would manage to catch the eye of a busy viewer walking down the street; they make clever visual puns, and refer to antiquity, feminist values, sexual innuendoes, anti-war protests, and, of course, to other famous posters. The visual references are sometimes obvious like a chastity belt or naked female statues; other times they are more subtle, like fat and rounded lettering or psychedelic

29 We have come across many references to antiquity in these various posters: in words, clothing, and various weapons or military garb. However, some references are more distinctly classical than others and can be organized into four types: 1) references to neo-classical or Greek or Roman statues (a1, a2, c8, e7); 2) Greek vases (c3); 3) ancient mosaics (c7); and 4) architectural elements, usually the Parthenon or simply the Acropolis (c2, e1, e3, e5, e6).

30 This paper is based on my database collating a few hundred posters of *Lysistrata* and other plays by Aristophanes.

visual cues to remind the viewer of the peace movements of the 1960s. The complexity of the medium is as exciting as the means at the disposal of the illustrators to impact the tired eyes of an audience living in the audio-visual age. Among the many small discoveries I made analyzing these posters, what surprised me most was the fact that most of these plays were produced by universities and that many anti-war *Lysistrata* posters were inspired by successful posters encouraging the war effort during World War II.<sup>31</sup>

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31 Disclaimer: Significant effort was made to secure permissions from the artists or designers whose work is featured in this chapter or from the copyright holders. We welcome those who feel that their material has been unrightfully reproduced to come forward.



A1

C. Reddicliffe (dir.), Mission Theatre (UK).

© 2005 DAN SHEARN.



A2

M. Matzke (dir.), LCC Theatre (USA).

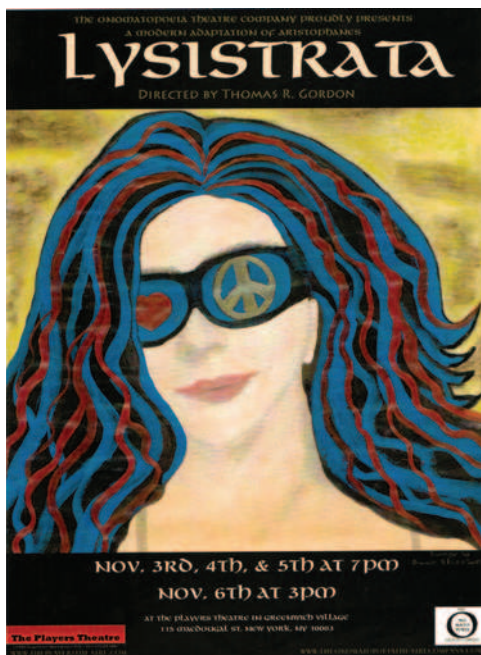
© 2004 LANSING COMMUNITY COLLEGE.



A3

*J. Demarest (dir.), The Sock Puppet  
Guerilla Theater (USA).*

© 2013 JAKI DEMAREST.

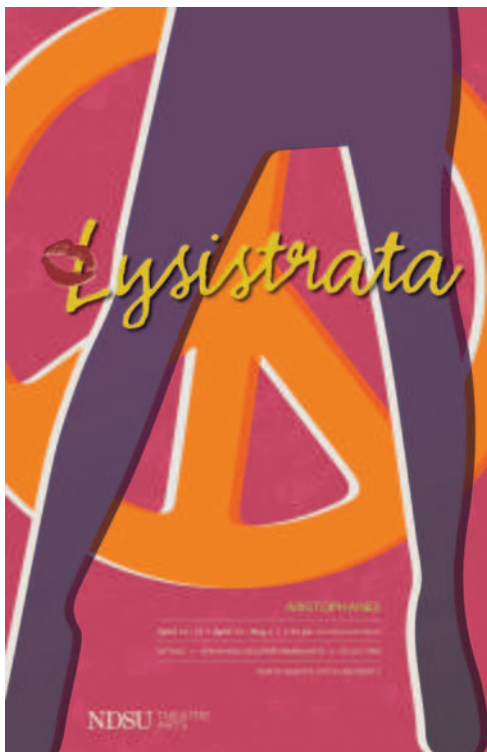


A4

*T. R. Gordon (adapt.), Onomatopoeia  
Theatre Company (USA).*

© 2011 ANNA ELIZABETH.





A5

*C. Pace (adapt.), Newfangled Theatre Company (USA, 2015).*

© NORTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY. DESIGNER: KATIE ELENBERGER.



B1 *K. Davis (dir.), U. of Science and Arts of Oklahoma, Theatre Arts Department (USA).*

© 2009 SHAYNA POND.

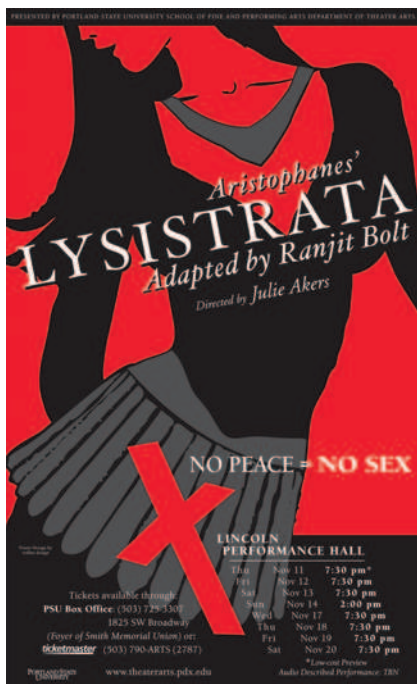


B2  
P. Sarzacq (dir.), *L'Atelier Théâtre de l'Université du Maine* (France, 2012).  
© ATUM.



B3  
B. Salva (dir.), *Théâtre à l'Ouest* (Canada, 2009).  
© BERNARD SALVA.





B4

*J. Akers (dir.), Lincoln Performance Hall (USA, 2004).*

© KRISTIN SUMMERS, REDBAT DESIGN.



B5

*C. Bloom (dir.), King Center Production Studio (USA).*

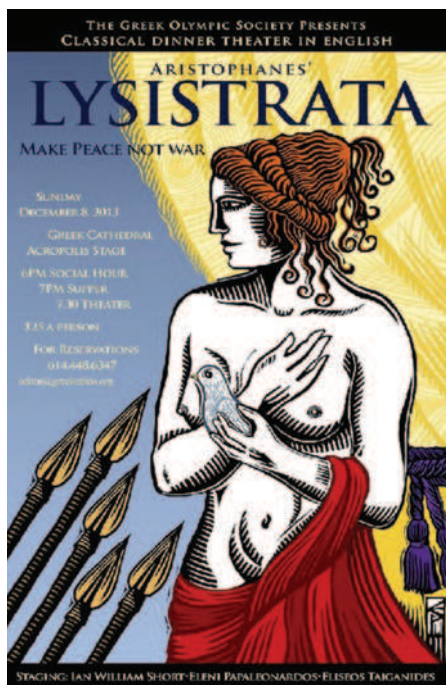
© 2012 BRYAN SMITH MEDIA.



B6

*R. Acquaviva (dir.), Sudden Théâtre (France, 2011).*

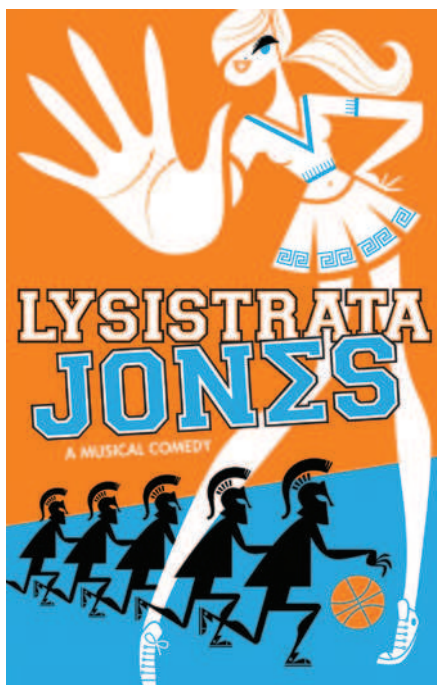
© LULU INTESKY.



B7

*I.W. Shott, E. Papaleonardos, E. Taiganides (dir.), Greek Cathedral Acropolis Stage (USA, 2013).*

© EVANGELIA PHILIPIDIS (www.Greek Ethos.org).



B8

*K. Johns (dir.), Broadway Musical (USA, 2011).*

© KIRSTEN ULVE.



B9

*S. Falk (dir.), Syracuse University Boar's Head Theatre Production (USA, 1954).*

© SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY.



B10

(dir.?), *Anglia Ruskin University Student Union* (UK, 2015).

© CHRISTINA SUND (DESIGNER).



B11

"*Women of Britain—Come into the Factories*" by Philip Zec, 1941.



B12

(dir.?), University of Bournemouth  
Theatre and Dramatic Arts  
Department (UK, 2008).

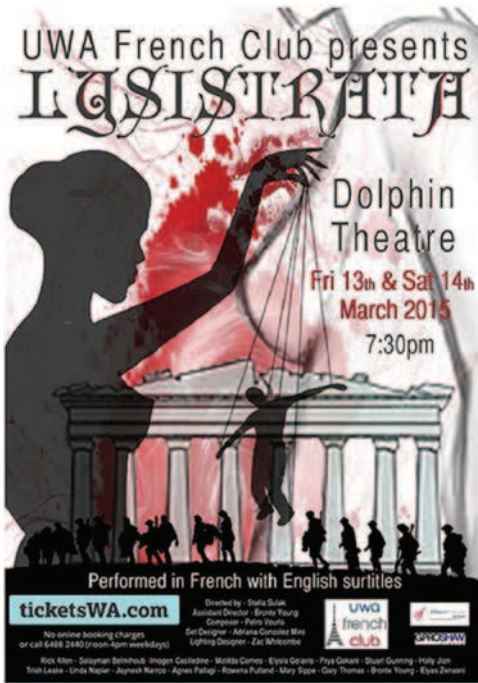
© ANDI BEST (DESIGNER).



C1

© 2004 Ruiaya (designer, [www.deviantart.com](http://www.deviantart.com)).

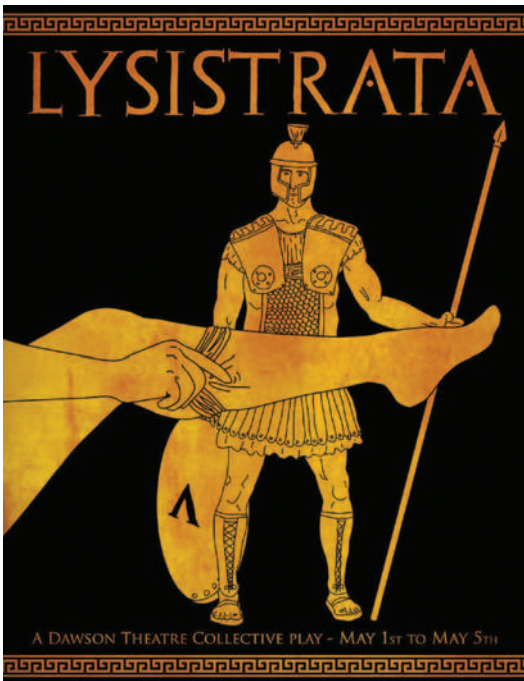




C2

*Stella Sulak (dir.), Dolphin Theatre (Australia).*

© 2015 STELLA SULAK.



C3

1st version (see E6 below).  
A. Lambert (dir.), Dawson  
Theatre Collective (Canada,  
2012).

© OKHAN ORHAN (www.okhanorhan.com).



C4

R.J. Boisseau (dir.), *The Hampton Players* (USA, 2006).

© JONALYN RECTO.



C5

C. Sillett (dir.), *Theatrical Niche Ltd* (UK, 2015).

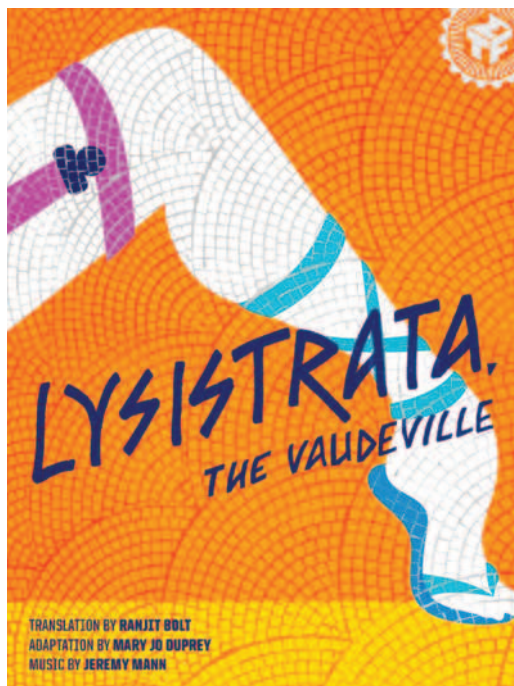
© HARRY TWIGG.



C6

*D. Goldman (dir.), Georgetown University Theatre and Performance Studies Program (USA, 2009).*

© DESIGN ARMY, WASHINGTON, D.C.

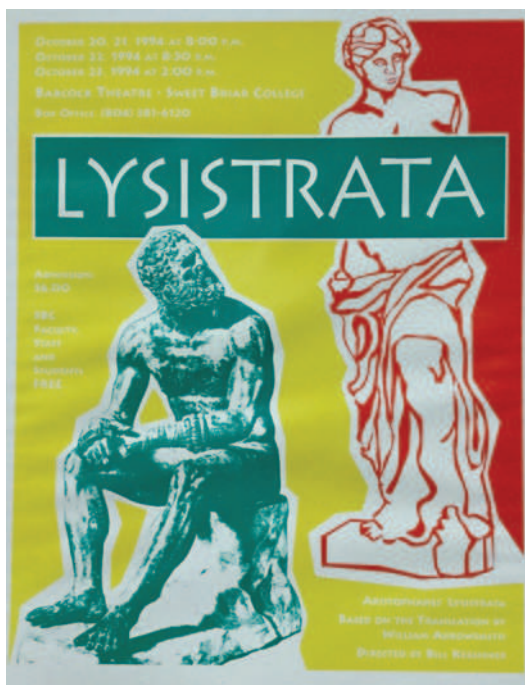


C7

*M.J. Duprey (dir.), Musical Theatre Factory (USA, 2015).*

© MICHELLE DIMUZIO FOR MUSICAL THEATRE COMPANY.

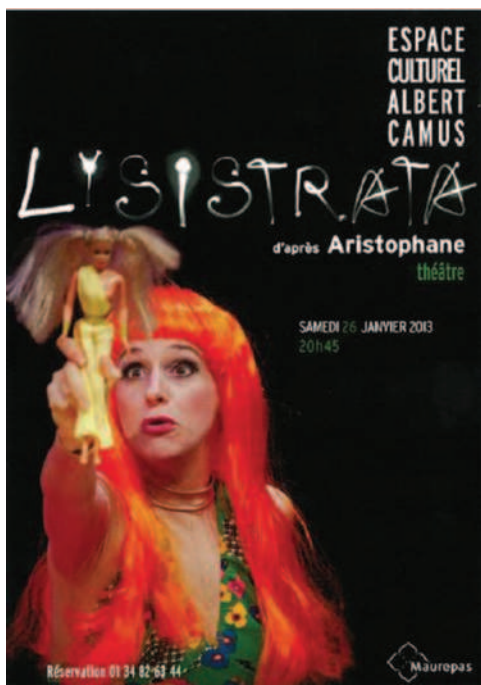




C8

*B. Kershner (dir.), Babcock Theatre (USA, 1994).*

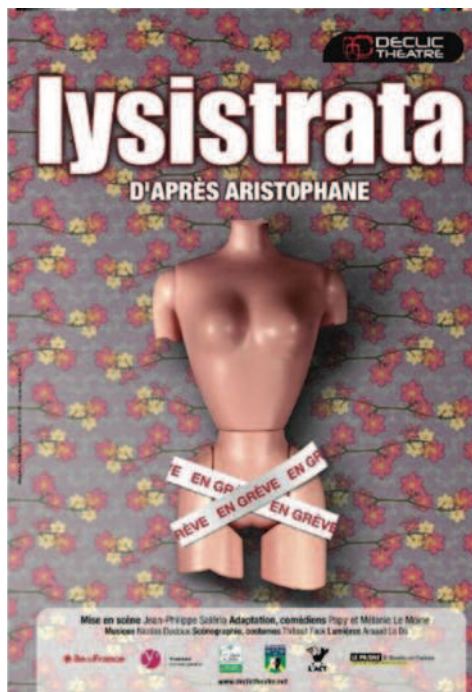
© COURTESY OF SWEET BRIAR COLLEGE.



D1

*J.-P. Salério (dir.), Espace Culturel Albert Camus (France, 2011).*

© COMPAGNIE DÉCLIC THÉÂTRE.



D2

J.-P. Salerio (dir.), *Espace Culturel Albert Camus* (France, 2013).

© COMPAGNIE DÉCLIC THÉÂTRE.



D3

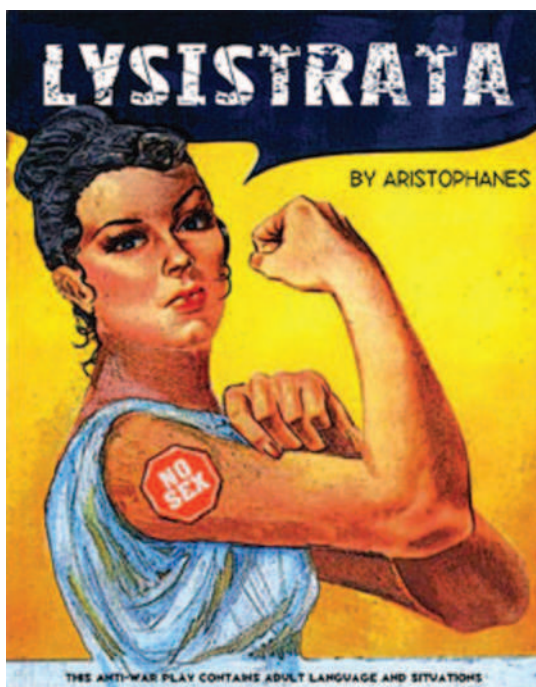
B. Guiton (dir.), *Le Théâtre Exalté* (France, 2013).

© SÉBASTIEN QUENCEZ, SIDONIE GUITON, LE THÉÂTRE EXALTÉ.



D4

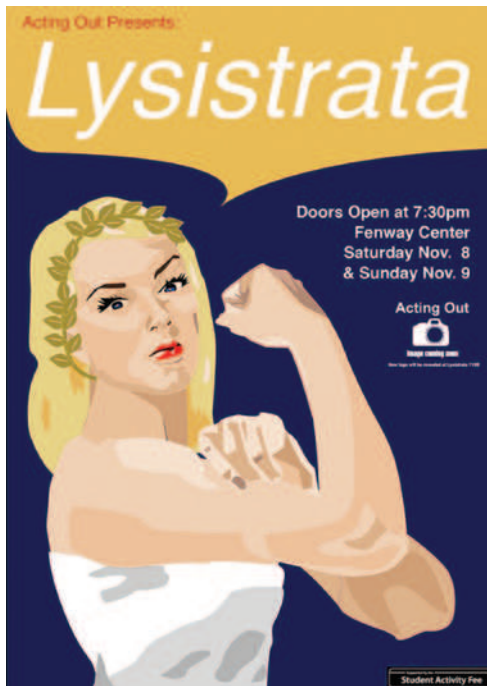
*"We Can Do It!", Westinghouse  
(USA, 1943) by J. Howard Miller.*



D5

*A. Golson (dir.), Robert B. Moore  
Theatre (USA, 2009).*

© COURTESY OF ORANGE  
COAST COLLEGE, COSTA MESA,  
CA.



D6

*T. Tanner (asst. dir.), Fenway Center (USA, 2014).*

© KATIE METZ.



D7

*P.S. Bauer (dir.), Simpatico Theatre Project (USA, 2013).*

© SIMPATICO THEATRE PROJECT,  
DESIGN RADWAY/LEVITAS, PHOTO  
KATHRYN RAINES.





D8 A. Deusien (dir.), Ponton Theatre (Australia, 2014).

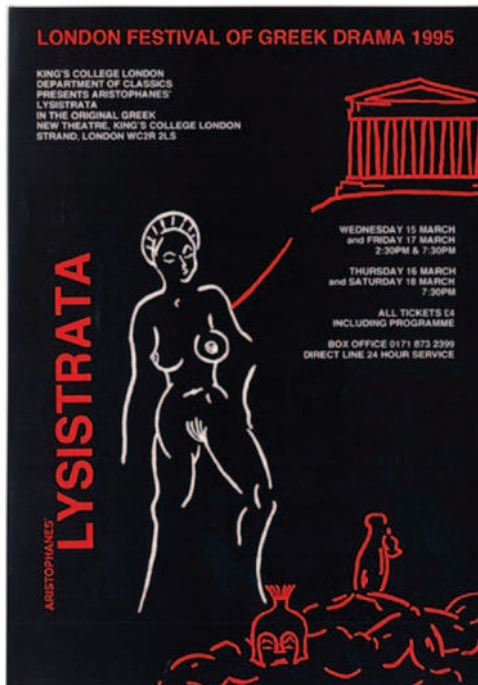
© ADAM DEUSIEN & KATHERINE JOHNSON, FROM THEATRE/MEDIA,  
SCHOOL OF COMMUNICATION AND CREATIVE INDUSTRIES, CHARLES  
STURT UNIVERSITY, AUSTRALIA.



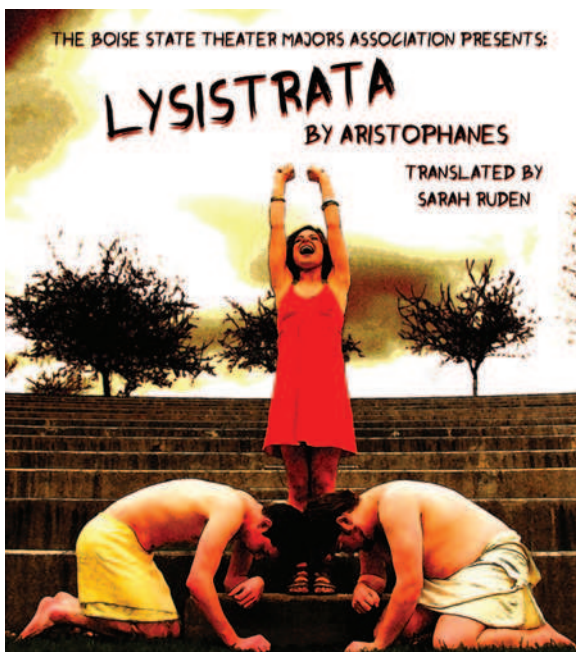
D9

S. Wallace (dir.), Burton Street  
Theatre, Darlinghurst (Australia,  
2004).

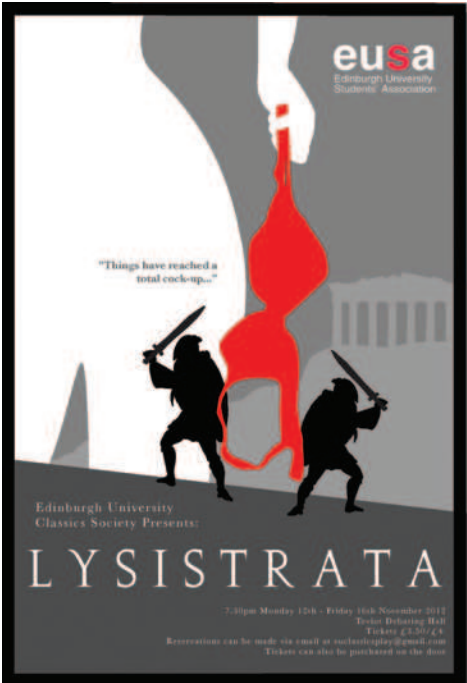
© PENDING.



E1  
 (dir.?), *New Theatre, King's College London* (UK, 1995).  
 © PIA HAROLD, DEPARTMENT OF CLASSICS, KING'S COLLEGE LONDON.



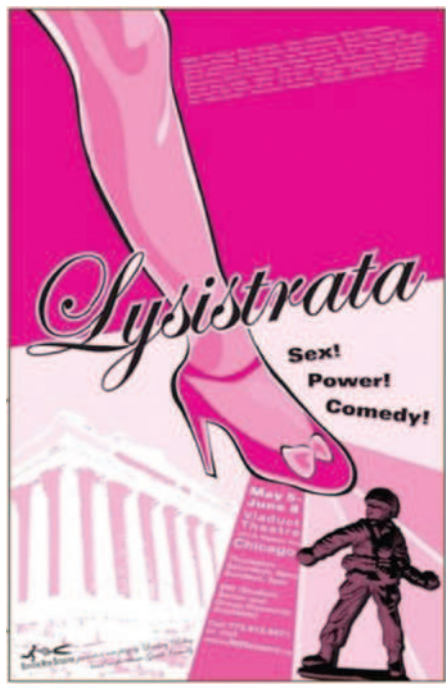
E2  
 (dir.?), *Morrison Center Danny Peterson Theatre* (USA, 2011).  
 © THE BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY THEATER MAJORS ASSOCIATION.



E3  
(dir.?), *Edinburgh University Classics Society* (UK, 2012).  
© AMY WATT ([www.amywatt.co.uk](http://www.amywatt.co.uk)).



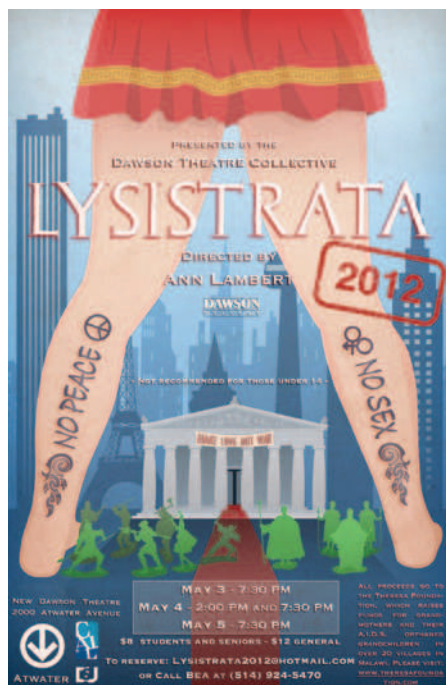
E4  
(dir.?), *Wing Theatre in New York* (USA, 2009).  
© PHARE PLAY PRODUCTIONS.



E5

(dir.?), Viaduct Theatre, Chicago (USA, 2003).

© RUNNING WITH SCISSORS PRODUCTION.



E6

A. Lambert (dir.), Dawson Theatre Collective (Canada, 2012).

© OKHAN ORHAN (www.okhanorhan.com).



**6 septembre > 16 octobre 2005**

# LYSISTRATA (LA GRÈVE DU SEXE)

Comédie en masques et marionnettes  
D'après **Aristophane**  
Mise en scène **Rafael Bianciotto**

Direction Colette Nucci [www.theatre13.com](http://www.theatre13.com)

**THÉÂTRE 13**  
183 A, boulevard Auguste Bligny - 75013 PARIS (13<sup>e</sup>) Glacière  
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Texte français de Hubert Leroux - Roman / Mise en scène artistique Marie Gonzalez Incroyable mise en scène Eric Tissot Masques Etienne Champigneux Costumes Marlene Luciani  
Musique Vincent Bouchet Marionnettes Omblin de Benque Chorégraphie du spectacle Catherine Jean Grégoire Chorégraphie Nathalie Van Panga Vitrine de chant Nathalie Doung  
Chargé de production Anne-Sophie Desfontaines Production Théâtre de la Seine - Quai Est avec le soutien de la Mairie de Paris-Mairie de la Région Île-de-France  
La Maison des Associations de Paris-Mairie de Paris, le Centre Culturel l'Atelier, le Théâtre de Nanterre, le Théâtre Antoine Vitez d'Ivry et La Caverne Théâtre de Collennes  
en association Théâtre 13

**MAIRIE DE PARIS**    **L'HISTOIRE** 

E7 R. Bianciotto (dir.), *Théâtre 13* (France).

© 2005 CÉDRIC GATILLON.