The Life of Aristophanes and the Cultural Context of Old Comedy
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This summer I worked with Visiting Assistant Professor of Classics Michael Nerdahl on a project surrounding the Father of Comedy, the ancient poet Aristophanes. Aristophanes worked contemporary with (and often in opposition to) the famous Athenian tragedians Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, and eleven of his plays come down to us in full. These plays convey Aristophanes’ strong political opinions and severe personal grudges in an atmosphere of lighthearted comic fantasy, making the experience of seeing his plays mostly enjoyable but occasionally uncomfortable. My goal for my summer project was to recreate the experience of seeing one of Aristophanes’ comedies for my peers, in the hopes of opening them up to the modern relevance of a classical text.

I decided initially to translate Aristophanes’ earliest play, *Acharnians*, from Ancient Greek to colloquial American English. I soon became discouraged at how many times translations already existed of the text, none of which could convey to an audience of my peers the humor that a Classics Major might find in the play, knowing the context of the jokes and the people who were being mocked. After reading up on modern performances of Greek drama, I found that though tragedies like the *Oedipus Rex* and the *Hippolytus* retain their haunting quality far past their initial performances, comedies like the *Acharnians* need a little more fine tuning. Rather than put on a production simply to do so, I concluded that to best create the experience of watching the original *Acharnians* I had to adapt the characters and jokes to modernity. The remainder of my summer was spent doing unforeseen research into modern politics, pop culture and up-and-coming curse words, with the goal of putting out a product in the spring of 2012 that conveys the message that though we live in almost different worlds, ancient Athens and modern America face the same leadership issues and uncertain future.

Naturally, posing a solution to the trials of democracy and empire that have plagued civilizations for thousands of years is ridiculous. In fact - as Aristophanes knows - it’s downright comic.

Faculty Mentor: Michael Nerdahl
Funded by the Surdna Foundation Undergraduate Research Fellowship