

this was serious work, it had a lighter side. In Greek, as Ramazani learned, *anthos* means flower and *logia* means gathering. Though built on a foundation of research

and political and economic calculation, the anthology provided an opportunity for its editor—and its readers—to stop and smell the poesies.

## *The Birth of Theater*

“The Invention of Theater: Recontextualizing the Vexing Question” by Steven F. Walker, in *Comparative Literature* (Winter 2004), 1249 University of Oregon, Eugene, Oreg. 97403–1249.

Who invented theater? Tradition—supported by considerable archaeological evidence—has always awarded that honor to the ancient Greeks, but scholars have long debated whether their invention was unique. Certainly, theater has long existed in other parts of the world, notably India, China, and Japan, but did the Greek invention somehow migrate to these other cultures?

That theory was first suggested by Albrecht Weber in 1852, and endorsed by Ernst Windisch 30 years later; they believed that during Alexander the Great’s conquest of Bactria (in present-day Afghanistan) in 328 B.C., the invading troops brought with them examples of Greek New Comedy, such as Menander’s *Epitrepontes* (*The Arbitration*). In the German scholars’ view, these Hellenistic plays provided the inspiration for early Indian Sanskrit plays, particularly ones known collectively as *prakarana*, which include *Daridracarudatta* (*Carudatta in Poverty*), which was written by Bhasa in the second century A.D.

Walker, a professor of comparative literature at Rutgers University, supports the Weber-Windisch thesis, but admits some obvious difficulties. Almost 500 years elapse between Alexander’s incursion into India and the earliest surviving Sanskrit plays, and the connections seem tenuous at best. (However, many ancient plays did not survive to be found by archaeologists.) Many scholars attacking the Weber-Windisch thesis have also pointed out that, although *prakarana* share some thematic elements with Greek New Comedy—“the love affair between a man of good birth and a courtesan, with a depiction of their contrasting social worlds”—the textual overlap is almost nonexistent. Certainly, it is not as evident

as in the various Latin versions of Greek New Comedy written by Plautus and Terence. Walker suggests, however, that “the existence of a language barrier may account for the fact that Sanskrit theater, unlike Roman comedy, did not rely on the ‘blueprint copying’ of Greek New Comedy—that is, on translation and close adaptation.” He considers it plausible, even likely, that the Greek *idea* of theater—the form, if not the content—filtered into India, and eventually spread beyond, to China, where fully formed plays appeared around A.D. 960, and, by the 11th century, to Japan. There is a model for such transmission in the migration of a “Greek-derived Gandharan sculptural style from India to early Buddhist statuary in China and eventually to Japan.”

Given the lack of surviving ancient manuscripts, it may be impossible to prove conclusively whether theater followed the same path. In any case, there’s another intriguing question: “Why has theater apparently been such a late invention in the history of world literature?” Even among the Greeks, it flowered relatively late, emerging several centuries after Homer. Evolving, as most scholars now believe, out of the patterns of religious ritual, theater had two distinctive elements. It required “breaking the natural bond with one’s fellows and with one’s own social persona in order to become someone else,” as well as “fellow human beings who agreed to look on without intervening.” Walker believes that while “the originality of each dramatic tradition in the global context is hardly debatable,” theater itself “may have been a difficult invention—so difficult, in fact, that, like the wheel, it may have been invented only once.”