The Birds in Historical Context

By Young Richard Kim

When Aristophanes produced The Birds in 414 BC, the Athenian Empire was in the midst of a prolonged internecine conflict, the Peloponnesian War, fought from 431 until 404 against Sparta and its allies. In 415 the Athenians undertook a massive invasion of Sicily, whose resources and strategic location were tantalizing prospects. The expedition, however, was a complete disaster. The Birds was performed before the final result was known in Athens.

Aristophanes was never shy about lampooning his contemporaries by name and addressing the most pressing issues of his day. While it is common practice to brand him merely as a “conservative,” one might argue that Aristophanes exhibited in his plays perspectives reflecting the elite segment of Athenian society. Were they his own? Or was he giving voice to views favored by the wealthy patrons of the dramatic arts? The very nature of comedy renders its hermeneutic open-ended.

Thus The Birds also has been the subject of scholarly debate. There are no overt references to the Peloponnesian War and its historical dramatis personae, but at the same time, scholars have tried to read into the various characters real figures such as Alcibiades and events including the Sicilian Expedition. Thematically, one might also see in The Birds critiques of democracy, demagoguery, bureaucracy and corruption, among other things. Then again, perhaps we ought also to ask if the play needs to be understood at all as some form of political allegory. Another perspective simply suggests that The Birds was meant to be entertaining escapism, pure and simple.

Whatever the case may be, Aristophanes’ masterwork lends itself to creative, even radical, reinterpretation. Nikos Karathanos’ vision is both true to Aristophanes’ original and adapted to reflect on, critique and play with contemporary issues and concerns. The production co-presented by St. Ann’s Warehouse is the foundation upon which a festival of events at various venues will explore, complicate and celebrate The Birds.

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