

# Media Commedia: *The Roman Forum Project*

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and Robert Allen

Since 2000, we have been working on a series of mixed-reality performance projects under the umbrella title *The Roman Forum Project*. There have been three incarnations of the *Forum* so far: *The Roman Forum 2000* focused on the unfolding events of that year's U.S. presidential campaign, especially the Democratic National Convention. *Virtual Live 2002* focused on the inauguration of George W. Bush and, to a lesser degree, the events of September 11, reflecting on America's reawakening to its place in world history. *The Roman Forum Project 2003* looked at the Bush presidency as a whole, and especially at the run-up to the war in Iraq. It premiered a bare week before the war began [1].

Although many individual U.S. artists have engaged the political, U.S. audiences generally are reluctant to accept that politics has any place in the arts. America lacks a strong, popular tradition of political theater such as exists, for example, in Germany, where an overtly political movement known as *Regie-theater* has dominated the theatrical landscape since the 1950s [2]. However, theater historian Janelle Reinelt argues that performance itself is as much a form of public discourse as town hall meetings and campaign stump speeches are forms of performance [3].

A central question for us in working on the *Forum* has been how to create politically charged performance work that does not immediately reduce to simple satire, cynical lampooning or lightly disguised propaganda. We found ourselves turning repeatedly to the Internet, because it has become one of the liveliest arenas of political discourse, where citizens are drawn to participate meaningfully in the central debates of our time. The Internet is responsive to changing events, it embraces a huge spectrum of opinion and it offers an increasingly accessible and ever-growing archive of historical material, especially with respect to recent events. But people do not just "search" the Internet; they play, perform, talk, fight, have sex and organize on it. All this activity amounts to a largely unscripted 24-hour improvisation. It is because of this dynamism that the Internet is such a valuable medium for gaining insight into our culture, particularly those aspects of it that get left out of the heavily edited mainstream media. When we did the first *Forum* project in 2000, one of our reviewers observed, "Who cares what some boob on the Internet thinks about the Gore/Lieberman ticket?" If there were only one "boob on the

Internet," perhaps we could dismiss him, but the reality is that there are vast numbers of opinionated boobs on the Internet (including us), and as artists we feel that it is our job to listen carefully to what is being said.

The Internet is unique in being both an evolving historical record and one of the places where the chaos of history is unfolding and taking shape. The *Forum* participates in both these aspects, using the Internet as a combination of performance venue, collaborator and archive. We see the *Forum* as an experiment in neo-vaudevillian political theater and likewise as an experiment in one possible future of performance in a networked world.

## ORIGINS

The *Forum* originated in our belief that Americans are still Romans under the skin, especially when it comes to politics—in our notions of civic virtue, in the particular types of corruption our system is vulnerable to, in our imperial attitude to-

## ABSTRACT

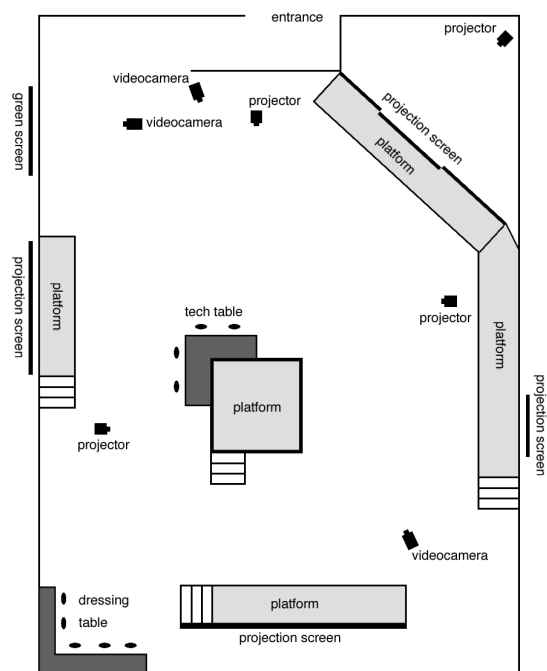
The authors discuss what they term "media commedia": performance works melding comedic performance traditions with new media technologies. They focus on *The Roman Forum Project*, a series of mixed-reality performance projects they produced whose subject is contemporary American politics and media as seen through the eyes of ancient Romans. They discuss the developing relationship between the Internet and public discourse; their use of avatars to explore the boundaries between performance and identity; their use of the Internet as an improvisational space; and the *mise en abyme* effects of working with mixed realities (including text-based virtual worlds).

Fig. 1. From left to right, Quintus (Alan Goodson) and Petronius (Kevin Keaveney) discuss America's "big sleep" as Germania (Kim Weild) listens. (© Antoinette LaFarge and Robert Allen) This was one of two scenes that took place in the dressing area of the performance space.



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**Fig. 2. Set design for *The Roman Forum Project 2003*, showing the performance areas in light gray and, in darker gray, those areas that are normally hidden in theatrical productions. (© Antoinette LaFarge and Robert Allen) All of the show's computer, video, audio and lighting technology (and the technicians running the equipment) were located at the tech table at center.**

ward the rest of the world. We decided to bring to life half a dozen vivid personalities from Rome ca. 60 B.C.E.–60 C.E., a period marked by a similar collision between the ideal of the republic and the reality of empire. At this time the Roman Empire nominally controlled the entire periphery of the Mediterranean but struggled to contain rebellions in its Mideastern provinces, while at home successive emperors chipped away at the constitutional basis of the Roman Republic.

Continuity from one version of the *Forum* to another has been provided by this recurring cast of characters, who range from a “barbarian” slave to the Emperor Nero’s second wife. We imagined our Romans (and today’s politicians as well) as composite figures: contemporary from the shoulders down, but marbleized Roman busts from the neck up—hence the whiteface makeup that characterizes the performers in all three versions of the *Forum* (see Color Plate A No. 1) [4]. We produced *The Roman Forum 2000* in downtown Los Angeles during the mid-August frenzy of the Democratic National Convention, which was booked into the nearby Staples Center. As the candidates began their autumn rounds of flag-waving, nobody had the faintest idea that the most gripping part of the campaign was still to come and would in fact take place *after* the votes were cast. Renewal of republic or end of empire—who can yet say which we were watching during those 37 feverish days at the end of 2000? Whichever it was, we were excited by the

fact that American politics seemed to have suddenly come unscripted—had become an ongoing improvisation—and we realized we needed to do a follow-up piece. We were originally scheduled to present the second version of the *Forum* in November 2001, but in the wake of September 11 it was canceled by the producing venue [5]. As a result of this delay, it did not get produced until March 2003. In the interim, we did a workshop production in New York titled *Virtual Live 2002*, which included two long monologues from the new *Forum*.

The *Forum* is essentially modular in structure; each version consists of self-contained sketches, some of which are new and some of which are reworked from earlier productions. In each production, the final script order is determined largely by the director, based primarily on such concerns as pacing, dramatic contrast, the best way to introduce the characters and technical issues such as costume-change problems. As the most recent version, *Roman Forum Project 2003*, is also the most fully realized, it is the one that will be discussed in depth [6].

## ROMAN AVATARS

A key element of the *Forum* project is the fact that our Roman characters exist simultaneously in two different realms: on stage and on-line. The on-line Romans originated as avatars in a text-based virtual world called a MOO. One of us (La-

Farge) has been working with MOOs as performance spaces since 1993 as director of an on-line performance group known as the Plaintext Players [7]. For the *Forum*, the Players chose the particular Roman characters they wanted to perform, and the mix included both real and fictional characters: the emperor Nero’s mistress and second wife (Poppaea), a famous writer (Petronius), an actor (Quintus), a slave (Germania) and the orator Cicero (see the Glossary for brief biographies of these characters).

All activity in a MOO is text typed in real time, consisting of a combination of commands and statements. Thus, MOO characters are created and sustained through textual improvisation. Even the historical characters such as Cicero are improvised, and so are in an important sense created by the Players [8]. The on-line Cicero shares crucial characteristics with the historical Cicero, but is also shaped in real time by the Player’s own personality and interests. On-line, Cicero exists simultaneously in 1st-century B.C.E. Rome and the 21st-century Internet, and this paradox leads to fruitful clashes between Cicero’s Rome and the Player’s America [9]. For example, in one scene from the 2003 *Forum*, Cicero discusses voting in Vermont: “Vermont, now; Vermont is about as far from Rome as you can get. . . . The margin of this civilization. Maybe the closest thing we have to a glimpse of how the Republic used to be” [10].

In the *Forum*, the on-line Roman characters are also represented by stage actors directed by Allen; these are, in effect, avatars of avatars. Moreover, because the on-line players can choose among 10 different genders in the MOO [11], there is no necessary or firm relationship between the gender of the on-line performers, the gender of their characters and the gender of the stage actors. In addition to this imperfect doubling, a set of nested, reflexive stories create a *mise en abyme* effect by virtue of the fact that contemporary U.S. actors are playing ancient Roman figures, who in turn are playing out stories derived from contemporary American politics [12]. The embedded nature of these performances was echoed in a number of staging choices: making the dressing room part of the set (Fig. 1), including the projection screens that serve the on-line performers as their “stage” within the physical stage and having an actor work in the same space with his own mediated image. We felt that these multiple degrees of mediation were key to representing

the nature of the Internet and contemporary politics as profoundly mediated spaces of enactment.

The script our actors perform is based partly on transcripts of improvisations by the on-line Romans and partly on other material culled from a wide variety of Internet sources ranging from chat-room flame wars to presidential speeches, the writings of 18th-century political philosophers and 1st-century Gnostic poetry:

I am peace, and war has come because of me.

And I am an alien and a citizen [13].

This fragment of poetry is included in a scene titled “What Would Jesus Do?,” which addresses the issues of weapons of

mass destruction, preemptive war and the just-war doctrine through a series of parallel interrogations set in different historical eras. Throughout the scene, the character Cicero is interrogating the character Germania, but their personae shift dramatically as the scene progresses, moving ever further away from their origins. In the first part, a Roman lawyer interrogates a Gnostic Christian slave charged with insurrection; then, a Roman military officer interrogates one of the Jewish rebels from Masada; and finally, a contemporary U.S. military officer interrogates a Catholic soldier.

*Cicero:* You are charged with insurrection. Specifically, with leading armed forays

from Masada to attack the Roman state. Not that I care, but I could also charge you for the attacks against your fellow Jews in En Geddi.

*Germania:* It wasn't insurrection, it was anticipatory self-defense.

*Cicero:* What?!

*Germania:* We knew you Romans were going to attack us, so why should we sit there and take the first blow? Force can't be our last resort. Not when there are so few of us.

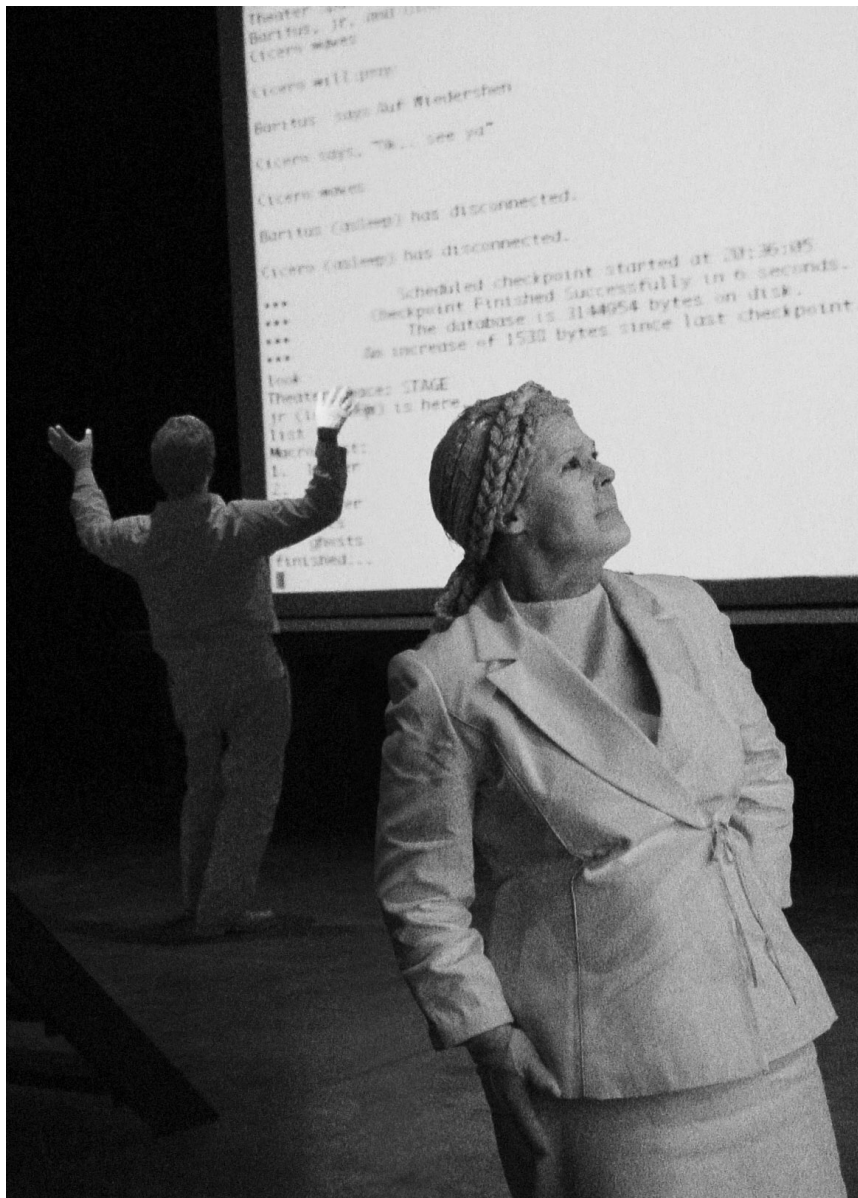
*Cicero:* Exactly. So few of you. How good an idea was it to start something you couldn't finish? If it hadn't been for you Jews we wouldn't have had to level Jerusalem. Masada too—your fault.

*Germania:* You had the weapons of mass destruction, you used them.

*Cicero:* We—the what?

*Germania:* (sarcastically) Rams? Siege towers? [14]

**Fig. 3. The Roman empress Poppaea (Helen Wilson) and Petronius (Kevin Keaveney), behind her, interact with a projection in which the on-line Romans discuss the state of the empire in the scene entitled “Babbalog.” (© Antoinette LaFarge and Robert Allen)**



## EXPLICIT TECHNOLOGY

From the earliest stages of our thinking about the 2003 *Forum*, we knew that we wanted to make the nature of current media technology a prominent theme of the new piece, especially green-screen video and streaming media. One of our goals was to give people an entrée into the complexities of media representation and politics by despectacularizing our use of media. To this end, we made the technology we used very central—visible rather than hidden, explicit rather than transparent.

The overall stage design was environmental, with raised catwalk-style platforms along the walls, together with a boxing ring-like platform in the center of the space (Fig. 2). The “set” consisted of these platforms and large video projections on screens or wall areas. All the technology—light board, sound board, DVD players, video mixer and switcher, Internet computers—and tech crew were clustered around the boxing ring, where it was completely visible to the audience at all times. There were no seats except for those who needed them for reasons of disability, so the audience moved around the space, following the action from one area to another.

In one area, a large green screen was painted on one wall, and two monologues took place in front of this green screen. During both, the audience could shift focus between the green-screen setup and large video projections showing the actor mixed into a canned video



Fig. 4. A contentious Supreme Court (Kevin Keaveney, Alan Goodson, Kim Weild and Helen Wilson) revisits the decision in *Bush v. Gore* that resulted in George W. Bush's becoming the 43rd president of the United States. (© Antoinette LaFarge and Robert Allen)

background. In one of these scenes (Color Plate A No. 2), Quintus plays President George W. Bush and makes a video will in which he finds himself "Apologizing for Everything" in a torrent of Bushisms:

*Quintus:* It was just inebriating what being president was all about then, I'm sorry, but there's not enough people in the system to take advantage of people like me. Sorry. Please listen to what has been said here, even though I wasn't here. I suspect hope is in the far distant future, if at all. And I'm sorry. (*pause*) You're on your own now. You gotta preserve. (*long pause*) Can someone *please* turn this thing off!?! [15]

## INTERNET AS STAGE

Because of the environmental staging, the centrality of technology, and our use of the Internet in the *Forum*, our audiences were both fascinated with and challenged by the fact that they had to decide *where* the performance was happening and *what* they were supposed to be watching at any given moment. The Internet itself served as one of our two main "stages": All of the performances in the Beall Center were seen simultaneously on the Internet through a streaming video web page.

We also had a two-way connection to the Internet that allowed the on-line Romans to take part in a scene titled "Bab-

alog" (Fig. 3). Here, the stage and the on-line Romans are both present—the audience is faced with two Ciceros and two Germanias as the on-line and stage realities merge into one extended performance space. The stage Romans are performing scripted material derived from an earlier on-line improvisation that

was ostensibly about Iraq but became entangled with the then-very-recent *Columbia* space shuttle disaster:

*Germania:* "Columbia Lost!"

*Cicero:* Sorry I'm late.

*Germania:* Shh, I'm reading the headlines.

*Petronius:* "Iraqis Claim Crash Is the Vengeance of Allah"

*Cicero:* What crash?

*Germania:* The shuttle.

*Petronius:* The market.

*Germania:* "Last Message from Shuttle: Roger, and Then Silence"

*Cicero:* Oh, you mean the great distraction [16].

This material was so structured that the actors' voices constantly overlapped as they pursued separate but interwoven lines of thought. At the same time, the on-line Romans (including several guest performers) were improvising on a theme that changed each day during the run of performances but, again, had largely to do with the then-upcoming war. These live on-line texts were projected on all the walls of the space, and at the same time were fed through computerized text-to-speech translators and piped into the Beall Center as audio. Each on-line Roman had her or his own individual synthetic voice. Thus, the on-

Fig. 5. Quintus (Alan Goodson, on right) is taught the difference between hanging and pregnant chads by Petronius (Kevin Keaveney) in the scene "Counting the Ballots." (© Antoinette LaFarge and Robert Allen)



line Romans were seen (as text) and heard (as synthetic audio) in the Beall Center at the same time as the stage actors were being seen and heard both in the Beall Center and on-line through streaming video. Blending human and synthetic voices in overlapping and conflicting narratives was our way of representing the polyphonic texture of on-line interactions on stage. The result was a kind of torrential vocal music—hence the name of the scene, “Babbalog”: babble plus dialogue, with perhaps an echo of Babylon.

The on-line Romans were scattered across nine time zones—only one of them was within even 50 miles of the Beall. Only a few of the on-line performers had Internet connections fast enough for them to either hear or see their own scene as it was unfolding in “real space,” but those who did commented on what was happening in the Beall Center as well as what was happening in their own virtual space (the MOO). The on-line Romans were thus in the curious position of being simultaneously performers and audience.

## MEDIA COMMEDIA

*The Roman Forum Project* draws heavily on the classical Greek tradition of comedy to make the piece accessible, with costume and mask work, impersonation of well-known political figures, and referencing of current events. Similarly, there is a close correspondence between the European *commedia dell'arte* tradition of stock “masks” and our half-dozen central Roman characters, who represent a deliberately broad range of classical types, ranging from a crafty slave to a social-climbing actor, and whose individual features are all obscured by their whiteface makeup. We have come to think of this combination of comedic performance traditions with new media technologies as a kind of “media commedia.”

We use comedy not to undercut the seriousness of our subject matter, but to emphasize it. If we think of the U.S. Supreme Court as a hydra-headed beast intent on devouring itself, and underline this by putting our Supreme Court into a single judicial robe with multiple openings (Fig. 4), the effect may be savagely comic, but the intent is seriously to revisit the tortuous logic of the Supreme Court decision in *Bush v. Gore*. If we have a clown scene in which the alpha clown teaches the beta clown how to count ballots (Fig. 5), people may laugh, but the intent is to point to the terribly fragile pillar on which our democracy rests:

*Petronius*: Now, a hole equals a vote.

*Quintus*: A hole equals a vote. (*nods*)

*Petronius*: So what's this? (*holding up a chad*)

*Quintus*: A dead vote? [17]

It was not our intention, in making the *Forum*, to promote a specific political agenda. Of course, as citizens we have our own points of view that inevitably come across in the piece. As artists, however, our intention was not so much to persuade people that our points of view were right as to expose the complexity behind reductive political perspectives, thereby opening up a space of productive dialogue that could include people who disagree with us. As an unknown audience member who had voted for Bush in 2000 wrote us after seeing *The Roman Forum Project 2003*: “I have not been so moved [and] now I must go back to the introspect of my soul to see the path in which I can do the greater good.” The e-mail was signed simply “Citizen.”

On election day 2000, the predictable scripting of American politics unraveled, and despite the will to return things to “normal” (whatever that is), there continue to be no foregone conclusions about what is going to happen next. This is hugely unsettling, but it also means that politics is where the most provocative and vivid stories are unfolding today.

## References and Notes

1. *The Roman Forum 2000* was performed at Side Street Live, Los Angeles, in August 2000. *Virtual Live 2002* was performed at Location One, New York, in January 2002. *The Roman Forum Project 2003* was performed at the Beall Center for Art and Technology, Irvine, CA, in March 2003.
2. The theorists who have had the most influence on contemporary European political theater include the East German playwright Heiner Müller, the Italian director and theorist Eugenio Barba and the Brazilian theorist Augusto Boal.
3. Unpublished article, 2003.
4. The contemporary aspect of our Roman characters was also reflected in our costuming choices: in 2000, for instance, we dressed the actors in toga-like garments made out of fabrics ordinarily used for business suits.
5. The presenting organization said the cancellation was for economic reasons; we strongly suspected that the post-September 11 chill on political dissent was a more important factor, but we will never know for certain.
6. Our collaborators on the 2003 *Forum* included videographer Amy Kaczur, sound designers Maria de los Angeles Esteves and Jeff Ridenour, costume designer Nicole Evangelista and lighting designer Christina L. Munich. The stage cast included Kim Weild as Germania, John Mellies as Cicero, Kevin Keaveney as Petronius, Helen Wilson as Poppaea, and Alan Goodson as Quintus. The on-line Romans included Lise Patt as Germania, Richard Foerstl as Cicero, Richard Smoley as Petronius, Marlena Cor-

coran as Poppaea and Joe Ferrari as Quintus. Additional video footage and still images came from the collaborative net art project “Democracy—The Last Campaign,” courtesy of DTLC creators Margaret Crane and Jon Winet.

7. For more information about the Plaintext Players, see their web site at <<http://yin.arts.uci.edu/~players/>>. For more about the experience of on-line role-play in text-based spaces, see Antoinette LaFarge, “A World Exhilarating and Wrong: Theatrical Improvisation on the Internet,” in Special Issue “The Third Annual New York Digital Salon,” *Leonardo* 28, No. 5, 415–422 (1995).

8. One of the best of the Plaintext Players refuses to discuss his on-line Roman character in terms of performance at all; for him it is simply another aspect of his real life.

9. Most of the Plaintext Players are from the United States, but a couple live in or hail from other countries.

10. From Scene 1.3, “Voting for the Dead,” in *The Roman Forum 2003*. This and all subsequent quotations from *The Roman Forum 2003* are © Antoinette LaFarge, 2003.

11. MOO genders include male, female, neuter, either, Spivak, splat, plural, egotistical, royal and 2nd. Each of these is associated with its own set of pronouns. Gender on MOO is both performative—the command “@gender female” causes a character’s gender to become female—and performed. There is often slippage in the performance of gender, as MOO players sometimes forget (or choose to ignore) what gender they are supposed to be playing and mix up their pronouns.

12. The contemporary stories also referenced ancient Rome at many points.

13. From the poem “The Thunder, Perfect Mind,” trans. George W. MacRae. On-line at <<http://www.gnosis.org/naghamm/thunder.html>>.

14. From Scene 1.13, “What Would Jesus Do?,” in *The Roman Forum 2003*.

15. From Scene 1.14, “Apologizing for Everything,” in *The Roman Forum 2003*.

16. From Scene 1.10, “Babbalog,” in *The Roman Forum 2003*.

17. From Scene 1.6, “Counting the Ballots,” in *The Roman Forum 2003*.

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## Glossary

**Bushism**—a neologism referring to President George W. Bush’s habit of mangling his sentences, especially when speaking off the cuff.

**Cicero**—Marcus Tullius Cicero (c. 106–43 B.C.E.) was an orator, lawyer and politician. At the end of a life spent defending the ideal of the Roman Repub-

lic, he led the Senate's unsuccessful battle against Mark Antony's attempts to seize supreme power in Rome, for which he paid with his life. His hands and head were cut off and displayed in the Senate as a warning to others.

**forum**—originally, a forum was a public meeting place in an ancient Roman city. It has evolved to signify a public meeting for open discussion, which nowadays includes on-line discussion groups as well as more traditional assemblies. The *Roman Forum Project's* title refers to all three usages.

**Germania**—Germania Servius (c. 35 C.E.—?), an entirely fictional character, is a "barbarian" slave from Germania, a Roman-controlled province covering most of what is now modern Germany east of the Rhine River. Her peculiar name, including both the feminine "-a" and masculine "-us" word endings (which would never have occurred in the actual Roman Empire) signifies her status as a nonperson within the empire.

**green screen, blue screen**—interchangeable terms for a method of compositing two movies, videos or still images. Typically, a subject is shot in front of a bright green or blue screen, and then the compositing process removes all of that shade of green or blue from the picture and replaces it with information from the second source.

**MOO**—A MOO is a text-based, multi-user, virtual role-playing environment. An important feature of MOOs is that they are entirely built and modified by

their users through programming in the MOO language. They can thus be tailored to specific kinds of on-line activity, such as the textual improvisations of the Plaintext Players. MOOs are an object-oriented form of MUD, or Multi-User Dimension; thus, MOO stands for MUD, Object-Oriented.

**Petronius**—Petronius Arbiter (c. 27–66 C.E.) served as the arbiter of taste at the emperor Nero's court. He is best known as the author of the *Satyricon*, a brilliant picaresque tale of which only a few sections survive. Petronius fell out of favor with Nero and was ordered to commit suicide, which he did by opening his veins at a party.

**plain text, plaintext**—plain text, also known as ASCII text, is composed from a specific set of 128 standard or 256 extended characters. ASCII, or the American Standard Code for Information Exchange, is the most common format for text files on the Internet. The ASCII set includes all the upper- and lower-case Latin letters, plus numbers and some punctuation, but no special formatting information. The Internet performance group known as the Plaintext Players, which works with textual improvisation, was named in honor of ASCII using the adjectival form *plaintext*, "of or pertaining to plain text."

**Poppaea**—Poppaea Sabina (?–65 C.E.) became the emperor Nero's mistress and, in 62 C.E., his second wife. It is alleged that Nero had his mother, his first wife and the philosopher Seneca executed at Poppaea's instigation. Legend has it that Poppaea was kicked to death by Nero.

**Quintus**—Quintus Roscius (c. 126–62 B.C.E.) was a Roman actor who became the most popular clown of his time. Although born a slave, he was later honored with equestrian rank by the dictator Sulla. He was at one time a student of Cicero, who taught him elocution.

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*Robert Allen is a theater director and movement specialist whose recent projects include Demotic (2004), Strindberg's Dream Play (2003), The Roman Forum Project 2003, and Zwischen Fear und Sex: Fünf Proben (Hellerau, Germany, 2002). He has an M.F.A. in theater from Columbia University and an M.F.A. in choreography and performance from the University of California, Los Angeles.*