

20 LAZZIS IN A HAT

Teacher Resource Pack

(Secondary)



INTRODUCTION

Commedia dell'arte is one of the most engaging styles of theatre for students. Elements of commedia have made their way into almost every theatrical form from the writings of Shakespeare (most notably *A Comedy of Errors*) and Molière, to opera (*I Pagliacci*), puppet theatre (*Punch and Judy*) and pantomime, to the work of the Marx Brothers and Rowan Atkinson. The fast pace and improvisatory nature of *commedia dell'arte*, along with its use of stock characters, make it incredibly accessible to a young audience.

The premise behind *20 Lazzis in a Hat* is to allow student to experience the improvisatory nature of *commedia dell'arte* through seeing the actors perform a series of *lazzi* then, in post-show follow-up in the classroom, explore the comic ideas themselves.

These notes are designed to give you a concise resource to use with your class and to support their experience of seeing *20 Lazzis In A Hat*.

CLASSROOM CONTENT AND CURRICULUM LINKS

Essential Learnings: The Arts (Drama), SOSE (History, Culture), English

Style/Form: *Commedia dell'Arte*, mask, traditional and contemporary clowning, Shakespeare, melodrama, visual theatre, physical comedy, physical theatre and circus, non-verbal communication and mime, improvisation, slapstick, political satire, parody

Themes and Contexts: Creativity, imagination, transformation, play, audience engagement and interaction, role and relationships, status, choices, dramatic form

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Emerging during the 16th century in Renaissance Italy, *commedia dell'arte* has its roots in the theatre of ancient Greece and Rome, most notably the masked and improvised comedy of the Roman Atellan farce tradition, with its buffoonish comedy and vulgar jokes. Other influences can be seen in the mime theatre of the Byzantine world, the jugglers and traveling players of Medieval Europe, the distinctive market culture that developed around early modern piazzas that featured performers, charlatans, and street festivals, and the rediscovery of the writings of Plautus and Terrence by Renaissance scholars.

By the 1520s, performers like Angelo Beolco (il Ruzzante) and early practitioners of the Zanni character type were entertaining audiences with a style that appears to be early *commedia*. Some early references to this style include names like *commedia all'improvvisa* (the improvised theatre) and *commedia zannesca* (the zanni-esque theatre). *Commedia dell'arte* (as it eventually become known, meaning 'theatre of the professional') remained highly popular through the eighteenth century. From its earliest times, performances were unscripted, held outside, and employed few props. While there was no admission fee to watch the performances, with the performers soliciting donations from the audience.

Players made their performances accessible to all social classes, removing language as a barrier through the use of skillful mime techniques, universally understandable characters, traditional gags and pranks, easily identifiable costumes and masks, broad physical comedy and improvised dialogue that was tailored to each audience.

Commedia troupes included women and children, at a time when all roles had traditionally been played by males, a development that would influence modern acting conventions. The traveling *commedia* troupes consisted of 12 or so professional performers, and each specialised in a single character.

Venice, Verona, Padua, Mantua, Ferrara, Bologna, Florence, Turin, Genoa, Rome, and Naples were hot spots of *commedia dell'arte* during the mid-16th to early 17th centuries. Troupes found success outside of Italy, with one granted permission to perform in London as early as 1566 and the company *I Gelosi* appeared at the French court in 1571. By the early 1700s, *commedia* troupes were entertaining audiences across the continent and had been commissioned to play for Europe's most distinguished monarchs, including Elizabeth I, Louis XIV, and the Russian Empress Anna.

Commedia conventions and characters found their way into other theatrical traditions, such as the British "panto", which flourished from 18th century, American clown routines, comic entr'actes, and minstrel shows which featured characters with names such as Harlequin, Columbine, Scaramouche, and Pantaloon, and in the French character Pierrot (a descendent of Pedrolino), an icon of the early 20th Century with his evocative white face and silent gesture, and in Bip, the white-face clown created by the legendary French mime, Marcel Marceau.

STOCK CHARACTERS

According to renowned *commedia dell'arte* Maestro Antonio Fava, the characters of the *commedia dell'arte* can be divided into four main categories:

- (1) The Servants (or *Zanni*) such as Arlecchino (Harlequin), Pulcinella (Punch), Colombina (Columbine), Scapino (Scapin), Brighella, Pedrolino, Pierrot, and the like;
- (2) The Old Men (or *Vecchi*) such as the greedy Magnifico (Pantalone), the know-it-all

professor (il Dottore), or the stuttering Tartaglia;

(3) The young Lovers (or *Innamorati*) with names such as Isabella, Flaminia, or Ortensia (for women) and Flavio, Orazio, Ortensio, or Leandro (for men).

(4) The boasting Captains (or *Capitani*) and their female equivalent, the vivacious and oftentimes violent La Signora.

Hundreds of character names exist, each the invention of a particular actor, but all of them can be viewed as a derivative or hybrids of these four major character types.

The Doctor (Il Dottore) is extremely pompous, and loves the sound of his own voice. His interaction is usually with Pantalone, either as a friend, mentor or competitor.

He is typically depicted as an elderly man who only knows nonsense. He

believes that he knows everything about everything. His mask is unique in that it is the only mask in the *commedia dell'arte* to cover only the forehead and nose. He frequently wears a hat, and long, trailing robes.



The Captain (Il Capitano) is the stranger to the town, and in the story. Traditionally a Spanish soldier or mercenary, he is cowardly and not what he claims to be. He is boastful and swaggering and considers himself to be something of a “ladies’ man”.

A parody on the Spanish soldiers of the Renaissance, his costume is usually features a military-style jacket, often with a yellow stripe to indicate his cowardice.

His mask features an outrageously long nose and he may wear bristling moustache.

Arlecchino is a young male servant, usually to Pantalone. He is slow-witted but nimble, hungry all the time, and falls in love easily, usually with Colombina.

His costume is usually patchwork and he wears a black mask. He often carries a *battaccio* or slapstick. Also known as Harlequin, he is the prototype for later characters such as Pierrot and was himself, modeled on the mischievous imp-like demon from the Middle



Ages.

Tartaglia is a farsighted and has a stutter. His social status varies; he is sometimes a bailiff, lawyer, notary or chemist.

In this show he appears as a dim-witted servant.



PERFORMANCE CONVENTIONS

The *commedia` dell'arte* performance revolved around a scenario (or *canovaccio*) which outlined basic plot points, entrances and exits. Using the framework of the scenario, actors would collaborate to improvise an original performance at every show. The complicated story of intrigue, deception, despair, and ultimately (usually) happy ending was peppered with a rich collection of *lazzi* - polished jokes, bits, gags, feats of acrobatics, displays of skill, or comedic shtick that could be inserted into performances wherever the actors thought appropriate. Thus each performance was a showcase of, on the one hand, honed technique and carefully rehearsed physical comedy routines and spontaneity.

LAZZI

Lazzi are essentially gags or stock jokes, which can be added into the *canovaccio* in order to ensure the comic action keeps pace. Traditionally the actors in a troupe would have *lazzi* memorized so that they could insert them where needed.

ABOUT THE SHOW

20 Lazzis in a Hat is presented as an act-by-act show, playing on the idea of that the *commedia* performers would traditionally use a series of carefully rehearsed *lazzi* to keep the pace of their performances moving. In this way, the audience has the perfect opportunity to see how a *commedia dell-arte* performance is constructed.

Each *lazzo* follows a pattern - the characters enter, introduce themselves to the audience, set the scene and begin the *lazzo*. Some scenes will involve just the high status character interacting with the audience, some the low status characters, and others will involve both the *zanni* and the high status character.

Lazzo of the Chair – the Doctor enters, introduces himself to the audience and calls in his two servants, the Arlecchinos. An audience member is invited to take a seat on stage.

Lazzo of the Oranges - Arlecchino returns and calls for a volunteer. The volunteer becomes a table, balancing a box of oranges on their back. Arlecchino exits, leaving the table on stage. The other Arlecchino enters, sees the oranges and begins a juggling *lazzo* including members of the audience. Arlecchino exits.

Lazzo of the Ukulele - three Arlecchinos enter with a ukulele and sing a song.

Lazzo of the Hand Bells – the Doctor, assisted by one Arlecchino and the audience, teaches a

song with hand bells.

Lazzo of the Princess – the Captain re-enters and tells the audience about his romantic exploits. He calls in his helpers, the two Tartaglias, and they help him re-enact the story of how he rescued the princess.

Lazzo of the Band – the Doctor and the two Arlecchinos return for the final scene, and bring audience members onstage to create a band.

LEARNING AND ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

Art Form Definitions

Amorosa/Amoroso: the female and male young lovers respectively, another term for the *Innamorati*.

Battacchio: the wooden bat Arlecchino and other characters used, made of two wooden slats that when struck will produce a loud slapping noise without applying a striking blow.

Canovaccio (pl. **canovacci**): the summary of just a short scene.

Commedia: Italian for "comedy", it also is the widespread short name of the art form originated as masked, semi-improvisational street theatre with stock characters.

Commedia dell'arte: Italian for "comedy of the professional artists", the full name for the art form. Outside of Italy it is also simply called "Italian Comedy".

En travesty: cross-dressing in the attire of the opposite gender; going in drag. Though *commedia* allowed women to act in the female roles, sometimes (especially in the earliest years), men would play the older female roles with masks. Throughout all of *commedia*'s history, male and female Masks would often disguise themselves as a member of the opposite sex during the course of the plot.

First zanni: also called the *primo zanni*, these were servants of the highest rank, most power, and often most intelligence. These were the "straight man" of the classic comic duo. See also second zanni.

Harlequin: a term and proper name derived from Arlecchino usually meaning representing a clown, pantomime, or lovable tramp. Because of Arlecchino's brightly coloured costumes over the centuries, this term can also describe such clothing.

Harlequinade: derived from harlequin, a comedy featuring pantomime clowns or another term for *commedia dell'arte*.

Improvisation: creation of dialogue and action by the actor at the moment of performing instead of from a memorized script. In *commedia*, the improv is guided by the summary of the scenario.

Innamorati: the plural form of the *innamorata* (female) and *innamorato* (male), the young lovers present in most scenarios. It is their desire to be with each other that most of the other plots revolve around. Individuals can also be called *amorosa* and *amoroso*.

Intermezzo (pl. **intermezzi**) - short, unrelated and independent performances done between the acts in some *commedia* productions. These can be musical numbers, dances, jugglers, short comedic skits, etc.

Irony, dramatic: elements of the plot or characterizations that are known to the audience but not to the characters on stage. This was often used in *commedia*, especially for audience members who were familiar with certain Masks and for some characters are easily fooled.

Lazzo (pl. **lazzi**): various comedic stage business (verbal and physical) that often have little if anything to do with the plot but can be inserted in almost any play.

Mask 1: (Italian - **maschere**) usually made of hardened leather, these covered the face and were shaped to associate with a particular character, often with exaggerated features such as long nose or deep wrinkles. The mask usually covered only three quarters of the face (though known as a "half-face mask") leaving the mouth exposed for expression. Other characters used intense makeup in lieu of a mask and others wore no mask at all. Later generations did away with many of the masks to give the actor a wider range of facial gestures.

Mask 2: is also a term for *commedia* characters, even for those who did wear an actual mask.

Punch and Judy - English puppet plays based on the *commedia* character of Pulcinella.

Satire: Is comedy that is targeted at an individual or topic in society to provoke thought and to question the status quo. Parody is a form of comedy that imitates and mocks a style, a person or some other target to trivialize and poke fun.

Second zanni - also called the *secondo zanni*, these were servants of the lowest rank, least power, and often the most foolish. These were the "funny man" of the classic comic duo. See also first zanni.

Slapstick 1: the English name for a *battacchio*, the wooden prop bat used to make slapping noises.

Slapstick 2: The derived term for humorous, exaggerated violence and extreme physical comedy as well as the genre of such comedy.

Stock characters: In *commedia*, characters are based on typical social types and, over the years, were named and became highly recognizable to the audience. The characters were in many ways archetypes for characters in societies everywhere e.g. the miserly cranky old man, the mischievous servant, the lover, and the bragging soldier. The characters of the *commedia* usually represented an exaggerated mood for example sadness, mockery, confusion, or anxiety.

Vecchi: the old men, often Pantalone and Dottore and a few others. These usually represent the highest ranks of society (as seen in the plays) and have some control over the lives of the others, regardless how stupid, foolish, or (in actuality) impotent they are.

Zanni: the male laborers and servants, lowest on the social ladder, often from the peasant class. The word is derived from Giovanni, the most common male name of the time in Italy (the equivalent of naming them "John"). Can also be a generic independent Mask with the name Zanni.

PRE-PERFORMANCE ACTIVITIES

Key words and concepts

Discuss and define the following terms with your class in relation to the performance of *20 Lazzis in a Hat*:

Slapstick, visual comedy, physical theatre, mime, acrobatic, high status, low status, clown, masks, heightened physicality.

Making and Presenting

Exercise 1: Explore the Stock Characters

Go through each of the main stock characters in Commedia including how they walk, talk, stand, dress etc. Get the students to fill out a table identifying each of these.

Exercise 2: Tell Jokes & Say Tongue Twisters

To prepare for *commedia* it is important to get students to start thinking about jokes, what makes them funny and how they are told. Get the students to think of ones that they know or give them a selection to say to the class. Tongue twisters are a great way to warm-up for any vocal performance. They can also be incorporated into *commedia* performances as part of the dialogue.

Exercise 3: Create a Nonsense Scene

Provide the students with a series of nonsense words and get them to create a short improvised scene that is based around and features that word. The scene could tell the story of the origin or meaning of the word.

Exercise 4: Create a Comic Scene

Create short, comic scenes that illustrate the origins of morals or sayings. For example, "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush."

Exercise 5: Watch some Lazzi

Lazzi can be done either with real props or mime. Watch a few of the famous comedians such as Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Laurel & Hardy, Abbott & Costello, The Three Stooges, The Marx Brothers and some more modern day comedians such as Lano & Woodley. Focus on how they draw out the dramatic tension of the scene. See the following links.

Mr. Bean – First Aid

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P9ju80SMWZY>

Benny and Joone - Funny Scene

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FfzefmyaefE>

Charlie Chaplin - Escape from the Police

https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com%2Fwatch%3Fv%3DufeMOIYUGBU%26feature%3Drelated+

Buster Keaton

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lgpQ-K7n2uc>

Laurel and Hardy Water Fight

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FSJcYzN-vIE>

Exercise 6: Practice *Lazzi*

Have a go at stage fighting both with and without props, comic retrievals (e.g. trying to pick up a pencil but it keeps “running away” from you because it’s attached to a string and someone is pulling it away), trips and falls are always fun. Have the kids come up with some rules as to how best to perform the *lazzi* and have them teach it to the class.

Exercise 7: Experiment with Dance, Music and Acrobatics

Commedia performances often incorporated live music, dance and acrobatic skills. This is a fantastic opportunity to seek out the musicians in your class and give them a special role. Likewise with the dancers and anyone who has acrobatic or a specific party trick up their sleeve. Look at the effect of each of these elements on the performance and how it could help or hinder a scene (think about mood and atmosphere).

Exercise 8: Devise Improvised Scenarios

Once students have an idea of the stock characters start providing them with opportunities to incorporate *lazzi* into a dramatic structure. Provide them with some scenarios that were typical of *commedia*. Create some more modern versions of scenes to provide an opportunity to discuss how masked performance is still relevant in this day and age.

Exercise 9: Practice Scripted Scenarios

Use some traditional scripted scenes to give students the opportunity to understand the tone and language of the characters of the *commedia* and how they may like to differentiate their tone and language for their own character in either a traditional or modern day scene.

Exercise 10: Devise Your Own Scenario

Once students understand the components of *commedia*, have them form groups and devise an original performance based around the concepts of *commedia*. That is, an original stock character modeled on an animal, a master/servant relationship, a clear conflict that is played out using *lazzi* and elements of production such as costume and props to help with dramatic meaning and audience engagement.

Post-Show Follow-up

Discussion

Discuss how *lazzi* were used in the show. Focus on how the actors drew out the dramatic tension of the scene, the stock characters used, how they interacted with each other and the audience, how status was shown.

Identify the comic styles used and the theatrical techniques employed by the actors to create the performance.

Making and Presenting

Exercise 1: Character Walks:

- Have students walk around the room as a character of their (or your) choice. Encourage them to fill the empty spaces in the room and to avoid bumping into one another. When you call out "TAKE," students should freeze.
- Now as they are walking, ask them to imagine that an invisible string is attached to the top of their head. The string is going to pull them through space, causing their head to lead them. Have students explore walking this way. What happens to the rest of their body? Do they speed up or slow down? Encourage students to think about who these characters might be: what's their name and/or profession? where are they going? Etc. Then call "TAKE."
- The imaginary string is reintroduced within a few seconds, only now it's pulling a different part of their body. Explore leading with the nose, chin, chest, stomach, hips, and knees.
- Encourage students to discover the voice of the different characters. You may pause and have students tell us about their characters and demonstrate their different walks.

Exercise 2: Emotion Levels

- Have students line up at one end of the room. Call out an emotion, like "sad." Ask students to take one step forward and show us with their bodies, faces, and voices someone sad at level 1. Then have someone else step forward and show us sad at a level 2. Have them increase their portrayal of sadness by exaggerating it and stepping forward at a level 3, then 4, and so on up to 10. By 10, encourage students to be over the top and dramatic, perhaps screaming and crying on their knees.
- Go through this progression several times with different emotions, like happy, jealous, or heart- broken. Discuss how the emotions change as they increase. If you were sad at a 1, what emotion were you portraying at a 10? Despair? Distraught?
- Once students get the hang of exaggerating the emotions step-by-step, this can become a game by calling out the numbers and emotions out of order. The facilitator can call out "Joyful at an 8," "Anger at a 6," and "In love at a 10!"

Exercise 3: Simple Scenarios

- Partner students into pairs of two. Give each pair a simple scenario from the list below. Have them improvise the scene once without masks. Encourage them to find three different ways of doing the task of their characters. The first time students typically rely on their voices and facial expressions to communicate the scenario.
- Once they have created their scenario, have students do it again, this time wearing a mask of some kind. This will require students to find ways of showing us who the characters and how they feel with their whole body.

Scenario 1: An Old Man and his Servant

Zanni, the servant, is very hungry. Every time he is about to eat his dinner, his master gives him a new task to complete.

Scenario 2: The Lovers

A young boy and a young girl fall in love at first sight. They discover their fathers are enemies and will never let them marry. They decide to run away together.

Scenario 3: The Captain

A soldier comes to a foreign city with his servant. He brags about how he has fought bravely in a war. The soldier then sees a mouse, and they are both scared away.

References

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Gibson, Mel, *Lazzi*
Grantham, Barry, *Commedia Plays*
Grantham, Barry, *Playing Commedia*
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Web Links

<http://www.thedramateacher.com/commedia-dellarte-conventions/>
<http://shane-arts.com/commedia-history.htm>
<http://www.factionoffools.org/history>
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