Commedia 101
Teacher Resource Pack
Primary

HOMUNCULUS
THEATRE CO.

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 *Commedia 101* is to introduce students to the style of *commedia dell'arte*, allowing students to experience, first hand, the improvisatory nature of *commedia*. Students will see *commedia* stock characters, classic scenarios and *lazzi*. This performance embodies the fundamental principal of the style: how to embody a character, through the use of the body, the voice and the mask.

These notes are designed to give you a concise resource to use with your class and to support their experience of seeing *Commedia 101.*

CLASSROOM CONTENT AND CURRICULUM LINKS

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

Style/Form: Commedia Dell'Arte, Traditional & Contemporary Clowning, Shakespeare, Melodrama, Visual Theatre, Physical Comedy, Physical Theatre, Non Verbal Communication and Mime, Improvisation, Slapstick, Political Satire, Parody, Absurdism.

Themes and Contexts: Creativity, Imagination, Transformation, Play, Audience Engagement and Interaction, Roles 7 Relationships, Status, Choices and Dramatic Form.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Commedia dell'Arte, also known as "Italian comedy," was a humorous theatrical presentation performed by professional players who traveled in troupes throughout Italy in the 16th century. *Commedia* troupes included women and children, at a time when males had traditionally played all roles, 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.

In spite of the range of dialects spoken throughout Italy at that time, there was no attempt made to change the performance's dialect from region to region. Even when a local company performed, much of the dialogue would not have been understood. Regardless of region, *il Capitano* would have spoken in Spanish, *il Dottore* in Bolognese, and *l'Arlecchino* in utter gibberish. The focus was placed on physical business rather than on spoken text.

Performances took place on temporary stages, mostly on city streets, but occasionally even in court venues. Better troupes, such as I Gelosi, performed in palaces and became internationally famous once they traveled abroad. Music, dance, witty dialogue, and all kinds of mischief contributed to the comic effects. As a result, the art form spread throughout Europe. 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.

Performance Conventions
Props
There were no elaborate sets in *commedia*. Staging, for example, was minimalistic—rarely anything more than one market or street scene—and the stages were frequently temporary outdoor structures. Instead, great use was made of props including animals, food, furniture, watering devices, and weapons. The character *Arlecchino* carried a *battacchio*, two thin strips of wood tied together, which made a great noise on impact. This gave birth to the word "slapstick", and went on to define a style of physical comedy.

Improvisation
In spite of its outwardly chaotic spirit, the *commedia dell'arte* was a highly disciplined art requiring both virtuosity and a strong sense of ensemble playing. The unique talent of *commedia* players was to improvise comedy around a scenario. Responding to each other, or to audience reaction, the actors made use of the *lazzi* (special rehearsed routines that could be inserted into the plays at convenient points to heighten the comedy), musical numbers, and impromptu dialogue to vary the happenings on stage.

Physical Theatre
Masks forced actors to project their characters' emotions through the body. Leaps, tumbles, stock gags (*burle* and *lazzi*), obscene gestures and slapstick antics were incorporated into their acts.

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*), including Arlecchino (Harlequin), Pulcinella (Punch), Colombina (Columbine), Scapino (Scapín), 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, some of which were associated with a particular region of Italy such as **Peppe Nappa** (Sicily), **Gianduia** (Turin), **Stenterello** (Tuscany), **Rugantino** (Rome), and **Meneghino** (Milan).

Characters such as Pantalone, the miserly Venetian merchant; Dottore Gratiano, the pedant from Bologna; or Arlecchino, the mischievous servant from Bergamo, began as satires on Italian "types" and became the archetypes of many of the favorite characters of 17th– and 18th–century European theatre.

Masks

All the fixed character types, the figures of fun or satire, wore colored leather masks. Their opposites, usually pairs of young lovers around whom the stories revolved, had no need for such devices.

Pantalone   Pulcinella

Arlecchino   Tartaglia   The Doctor

Brighella   The Captain

Costumes

The audience was able to pick up from each character's dress the type of person he was representing. For elaboration, loose–fitting garments alternated with very tight, and jarring color contrasts opposed monochrome outfits. Except for the inamorato, males would identify themselves with character-specific costumes and half masks. The *zanni* (precursor to clown) Arlecchino, for example, would be immediately recognizable because of his black mask and patchwork costume.

While the inamorato and the female characters wore neither masks nor costumes unique to that personage, certain information could still be derived from their clothing. Audiences knew what members of the various social classes typically wore, and also expected certain colors to represent certain emotional states. Regardless of where they toured, *commedia dell'arte* conventions were recognized and adhered to.

Music

The inclusion of music and dance into *commedia* performance required that all actors have these skills.

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 ranger 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 *Commedia 101*:
Slapstick, visual comedy, physical theatre, mime, acrobatic, high status, low status, clown, masks, heightened physicality.

Making and Presenting

1. Stock Characters
Go through each of the main stock characters in *Commedia* including how they walk, talk, stand, dress etc.

2. Jokes & 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.

3. Status
Have students pair up. One student takes the high status role and the other the low status role. High status sits on a chair, low status sits of the floor next to the chair and holds the front leg closest to them. High status demands a story (remind the students that the high status character is demanding and not polite to low status), holding up their hand closest to the low status. This hand is a Taser. Low status starts to tell a story. If high status doesn't like the story, they can Taser the low status. Have students swap places.

4. Create a Nonsense Scene
Hand out a list of nonsense words and have students 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.

5. Create a Comic Scene
Create a short comic scene that illustrates the origin of a moral or saying such as "A bird in

the hand is worth two in the bush."

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.

- Discuss how the masks are used to create the characters.

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: Rehearse and Perform a Scenario
In groups of 3, have the students rehearse a scenario for presentation to the class.
The scene must include:
- Two masters and one servant OR two servants and one master.

- At least one lazzi from the list below (more can be used if wanted).
- At least one character speaks to the audience at some point.
- An object of any kind that is held/used by each character at least once (bring in a real object – no miming).

Lazzi List
1. Any servant who is about to be hit quickly grabs another character to use as a shield.
2. Any servant successfully hides from a master in clear view (eg. under a lampshade).
3. Arlecchino, being chased, runs into the audience for help or to hide.
4. Arlecchino is tricked into thinking he is dead, while others point out a range of unlikely symptoms that prove he is dead.
5. Arlecchino begins to laugh hysterically. Slowly, his laughing turns to weeping and
6. Brighella offers Arlecchino food, which he eats with great enthusiasm. Brighella then pulls out more food, making whistling/calling noises as for a dog, then tosses the food across the stage. Arlecchino runs after the food and eats it off the floor as Brighella laughs.
7. Brighella stands still while things he has stolen fall from his clothing/pockets, as he is swearing to his honesty or innocence.
8. Pantalone has a heart attack and his servant attempts to save him through ridiculous means.
9. Il Dottore prescribes ridiculous treatments for ailments that would obviously not help at all.
10. Il Dottore seizes upon some trivial and well-known fact and pretends that he has made a discovery of the utmost importance.
11. Il Capitano screams like a little girl at something harmless and begins a long explanation as to what "actually" happened.
12. Il Capitano plays dead to avoid confrontation.

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