

# Spirit of the Mask

## Teacher Resource Pack



### INTRODUCTION

Masks are an important part of many theatre forms throughout the world, and their use in theatre has often developed from, or continues to be part of old, highly sophisticated, stylized theatrical traditions.

In western theatre, beginning some 2,500 years ago, actors in ancient Greek theatre wore masks. All the actors were male, and they all played multiple roles, so masks were used to show the change in character or mood. Masks challenged the actors to play their characters' feelings in more subtle ways, with voice and body language, since they couldn't use facial expressions.

The rise of Christianity in Europe paralleled the decline in theatre and it had disappeared entirely by about 400 C.E. For the next thousand years, theatre all but ceased to exist, only to be “reinvented” in medieval Europe as an extension of the official liturgy for religious purposes. Masks were used in these mystery and miracle plays to portray allegorical creatures, and the performer representing God frequently wore a gold or gilt mask.

Emerging in the second half of the 16th century in Italy, *commedia dell'arte* is a masked form of physical theatre that involves broad comedy and highly structured improvisation. The hallmark of *commedia* is the use of stock characters, often known simply as “the masks”.

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

### CLASSROOM CONTENT AND CURRICULUM LINKS

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

**Style/Form:** *Commedia dell'Arte*, mask, physical theatre and comedy, improvisation.

**Themes and Contexts:** Creativity, imagination, transformation, play, roles and relationships, audience engagement and interaction.

## 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 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.

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 (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, 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.



## 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 innamorato, 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 Innamorati 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, maschere: 1-** 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.

### KEY WORDS AND CONCEPTS

Discuss and define the following terms with your class with respect to the performance of *The Spirit of the Mask*.

Slapstick, visual comedy, physical theatre, mime, acrobatic, high status, low status, clown, spirit, masks, heightened physicality, permission, upside down, classic storylines, stand – off

### KEY QUESTIONS FOR EXPLORATION AND CONSIDERATION

- Why is mask used in *commedia*?
- What is a clown?
- What happens to the body when you wear a mask?
- What effect does wearing a mask have on a performer?
- What is high status and who are some people you know with high status?
- Why have masks been used in theatre throughout history
- How important is the face when communicating? Why do we wear masks on our face?

### LINKS TO THE CURRICULUM

The following learning experiences provide an entry point to the style of the performance and its thematic investigations.

#### Drama: Pre-performance Activities

##### *Making and presenting*

Warm up: Exploring physical and gestural aspects of comedy

Students walking around the room as if:

- *They are 50 kilograms heavier*
- *Their knees have turned to jelly*
- *They can't control their legs and arms*
- *They are invisible and can move silently*

Discuss with class what characters are suggested by some of the movements.

Now try these movements with a mask on and exaggerate the physical actions even more.

### **Exercise 1: Exploring Status**

Students to play “The Emperor Game” (Keith Johnstone). One student sits onstage as the all-powerful emperor/empress. The other students must approach in as low-status manner as possible to serve or offer a gift. The emperor/empress is extremely touchy about his/her status and if offended will click his fingers and the servant will instantly die. Important: The emperor/empress must explain why he/she killed the servant. The game is an opportunity to explore and play with status. Change the roles around, coach the emperor/empress to be suspenseful and not click their fingers straight away.

### **Exercise 2: Two-Person, Two-Minute Improv**

Create your own two-person improv scene. Begin by choosing characters, environment and conflict.

#### *Characters*

Each person should start with a “character type.” Remember that each of the *commedia* characters had a basic trait: Pantalone = being greedy, Il Dottore = being a “know it all,” Il Capitano = bragging, Arlecchino = tricky, Colombina = clever, etc. What’s your character’s basic trait? The more exaggerated it is, the funnier it is.

*What’s the relationship between your two characters? Are they:*

- complete strangers
- friends
- enemies or “frenemies”
- enemies but only one recognizes the other
- boss and employee
- lifeguard and beachgoer
- store clerk and customer
- doctor and patient
- professor and student
- waiter and food critic
- ticket agent and passenger

#### *Environment*

Choose a location where people might encounter each other. For instance:

- Library
- Supermarket
- Shopping centre
- Park or playground
- Beach
- Restaurant

#### *Conflict*

The conflict in a scene has two elements – what does a character want, and what is getting in the way? Usually the thing that’s getting in the way is something physical.

One character wants or needs . . .	But he or she . . .
. . . to impress the other . . . to convince the other to lend them some money . . . a job from the other . . . to buy something from the other . . . to find out a secret from the other . . . a good grade or a promotion from the other . . . wants the food the other character has	. . . has unstoppable hiccups . . . keeps tripping over things . . . slips and falls . . . accidentally used itching powder instead of sunscreen or perfume/aftershave . . . gets so nervous they just make sounds instead of talking . . . can't stop exaggerating . . . laughs at the wrong time . . . isn't wearing their glasses and can't see . . . keeps calling the other character by the wrong name, or thinks they are someone else

One of the major rules of improv is to always “say yes” – play along with whatever your partner is doing. Saying “no” or opposing what your scene partner is trying to do will stop the scene from progressing. The characters can disagree, but the actors are working together to create the scene.

For example:

**“Saying no”**

FOOD CRITIC: Waiter! Is this a grasshopper hiding in my salad?

WAITER: No it isn't.

(Now the person playing the food critic has to come up with another idea, which stops the momentum of the scene.)

**“Saying yes”**

FOOD CRITIC: Waiter! Is this a grasshopper hiding in my salad?

WAITER: Yes . . . but he's really very shy, and you're scaring him.

**“Saying yes” (in a different way)**

FOOD CRITIC: Waiter! Is this a grasshopper hiding in my salad?

WAITER: No it isn't . . . it's a slug. You didn't say “no slugs,” that's a dollar extra.

When you have your characters, location and conflict chosen, start your scene. Set a timer for two minutes, and see what happens.

*Responding*

*Introducing the performance*

- Show the students the performance image on the Homunculus website. Ask what the image tells them about the performance. Introduce the creative team and discuss the style of theatre. Students to view the list of Commedia characters and their typical characteristics (please see list on the website).
- Students to research the history of the mask in theatre and the different cultures where it exists.
- Students brainstorm their favourite comedies and discuss what characters they like and why?
- Discuss with the class the importance of laughter for wellbeing.



## **DRAMA**

### **Post-performance Activities**

#### *Making and presenting*

- Students to create in small groups a memorable moment from the play. Encourage students to carefully recreate the posture, facial expressions and demeanour of the character. Present to class and discuss why the moment engaged the audience.
- If you have masks, ask 3-4 students to get up and don masks (facing away from audience then turning around). Other students then mold them into a posture that suits the mask. The students then teach the mask characters to make sounds (no words yet). Next, get them to walk the characters about the room as if they were 'just born into the world' and need to be introduced to everything, i.e. "This is a chair," etc. (important to obey mask protocols - if you are wearing a mask you are not yourself and you should always take it off and put it on away from the audience.)
- Students in pairs create a classic standoff scene reminiscent of 'The Two Captains' scene from the show. In character, they try to continually out do the other with bragging - e.g. 'I'm so hot the sun is jealous', allowing the scene to escalate until they must draw their swords to save 'face' (but remember they are cowards!). They then must find reasons as to why they cannot fight, e.g. 'I would fight you but it's my day off!'

#### *Responding*

- Students to brainstorm with teacher the moments they liked from the performance. Teacher to write up responses. Students then discuss any moments they found challenging?
- Using the following questions further unpack the construction of the performance: *How did the performers create different spaces and the environments in the performance? How did the two different actors create the characters through movement and mask? How did the performers introduce the mask? What do they mean by the "spirit of the mask"? What skills did they stress for working with the mask? What does it mean to say the mask gives an actor "permission"? What and why can people get away with when they have a mask on? Why do we wear masks on our faces?*

## **CONCLUSION**

*Do you have questions about the performance? How was it different to other performances you have seen?*

### **English: Pre-performance Activities**

- Why is it so important to laugh, both personally and in our communities?
- Students in pairs create a poster that advertises a clown/mask performance coming to the school.
- Students investigate the website of Homunculus Theatre. What can we tell from the images? Why is the company called Homunculus? What does that word mean and why do you think it was chosen? (Hint: About section on the website)

### English: Post-performance Activities

- Students write a letter to a friend about the performance/workshop. What did they learn? What their favourite moment and why? Was there anything they didn't understand?
- Consider the characters; describe them and relate them to modern examples or people they remind you of in your life. E.g. the Captains and the Lovers.
- Students to consider the impact of the "cyber-mask." Discuss the problems online created by people using the mask of anonymity to tease and bully others? Students to write an essay about "The problems created by the cyber-mask".
- Students to do a creative writing task; *what happens when a mask is on? Why does it give permission for the person to get away with more?*

### References

Fava, Antonio, *The Comic Mask in the Commedia dell'Arte*

Gibson, Mel, *Lazzi*

Grantham, Barry, *Commedia Plays*

Grantham, Barry, *Playing Commedia*

Kishawi, Tony, *Teaching Commedia dell'Arte*

### Web Links

<http://www.thedramateacher.com/commedia-dellarte-conventions/>

<http://shane-arts.com/commedia-history.htm>

<http://www.factionoffools.org/history>

<https://sites.google.com/site/italiancommedia/lazzi>

[http://www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/secondary/languages/languages/italian/assets/pdf/Lan\\_commedia.pdf](http://www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/secondary/languages/languages/italian/assets/pdf/Lan_commedia.pdf)

<http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/staffhome/trsanders/units/comedy/dellarte.html>

<https://dramateachersnetwork.wordpress.com/tag/commedia-dell-arte/>

<http://www.angelfire.com/art/masks/maskhistory.html>

<http://www.antoniofava.com/-home-?lang=en>

<https://theater-masks.com/about-commedia-dell-arte/>

<http://www.historyofmasks.net>

<http://www.theatrefolk.com/blog/create-a-commedia-dellarte-character/>

[http://www.humanracetheatre.org/commedia\\_dell'arte\\_aug\\_7\\_screen.pdf](http://www.humanracetheatre.org/commedia_dell'arte_aug_7_screen.pdf)

<http://broadwayeducators.com/teaching-commedia-dell-arte-part-ii/>

<http://www.mimeguy.com/CommediaClassPlan01.htm>