

# Commedia dell' Arte

Class Outline/Notes  
Maestro Hirsch von Henford, OL, OP

## What Is It? Some Facts:

This form of theatre flourished in Renaissance Italy in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> ... While late in SCA period, it is very popular because it is a form of comedy that most modern folk can relate to. In addition, it spread widely throughout Europe in a very short time. This style is based on many sources, from the *commedia erudita* of the Renaissance, to the clowns and artists who entertained at the festivities of the nobility, king's jesters, minstrel, jongleur and medicine shows from earlier times, and even back to Greek comedies and Asiatic mimes.

Commedia probably started in the marketplace, where a crowd needed to be attracted, interested and held, if a living was to be made. From there it moved to other venues, including courts, and eventually to the theatre itself.

It was essentially improvised comedy, which followed a plot outline (called a scenario), as opposed to an actual script.

"*Commedia dell'arte*" means literally "comedy of the artist", implying professionals, as opposed to amateurs. It was sometimes given other names, such as: *commedia alla maschera* (masked comedy) and *commedia dell'arte all'improvviso* - both of which give a pretty good idea of the form. One source cites Dario Fo as saying:

"*Commedia dell'arte* means comedy performed by professionals, those who are recognized as artists. Only artists recognized by the authorities were classified as Commedia actors. The word *arte* in fact implied the incorporation of the dramatic arts; it brought together those who were authorized to perform for the counts, dukes, etc." *Dario Fo and Franca Rame*, London, Macmillan, 1989

The comedic style was very broad. It had to reach the common man, so while there may have been some "intellectual" jokes in a performance (often topical/political), most of it was (literally) slapstick (or low) comedy. Commedia is where the more modern music-hall or "burlesque" and "slapstick" style comedy of the 1920's and later is based (although most of that was scripted).

It should be noted however, that while the term "improvised" is used often when talking of Commedia, it may not have been quite as improvised as we think. This concept was discussed with professional Commedia actors Gian Giacomo Colli and Olly Crick (at the Austin Commedia Festival in 2001), who pointed out that most likely each actor knew his character very well, and had a large repertoire of stock speeches, phrases, and reactions. When any given situation was tossed his way, he would have several options and pick and choose one as needed. Combined with a scenario that was effectively a road-map to the actors for how to get from point a to point b in the plot, and it's not quite as much "pure" improvisational theatre as one might imagine. The actors still had lots of leeway to run with a situation, but since everyone depended on cooperation from everyone else in the troupe, one actor couldn't really change the plot.

There were usually a dozen or so "stock" characters, most of whom wore masks. These stock characters remained constants throughout the life of this form of theatre, although the names might change from one acting troupe to another.

The stock characters included *zannis* or clowns, which were the embodiment of the spirit of the *commedia dell'arte*. Many of the names are well-known: Brighella, Arlecchino, Pulcinella, Scaramuccia, and more. They were often the main attraction of the troupe — these were usually acrobats, jugglers, and the ones who often made obscene gestures at the audience ... One of the *zannis*, Tomasso Vicentini, who played Arlequin in Paris in the 1720's could climb the proscenium arch, walk around the railing of the balcony on his hands and descend the other side. When examining known *commedia* scenarios, it has been shown that some of the 'stock' characters vary based on the part of Italy the troupe was from – so one troupe might not have a Pulcinella character at all, while another might not have a Brighella.

Most of the important actors/characters, except the hero and ingénue wore masks, and each was easily identified by his dress. The use of masks simply meant that rather than using facial expressions to convey emotions or expression, the actors used broader body movements and inflection of the voice. Since the performances were often done in candle-light, and most of the audience couldn't see an actor's face anyway, this broader style of acting made even more sense. One source found mentions that female *zanni* did not wear masks, but instead went bare-breasted. While at the time this might have been acceptable, these days the female *zanni* either do not wear masks but are covered up; or they wear masks (*and are also covered up*).

Shortly after 1550, the actors started to organize themselves into companies or troupes. A company was often headed by a husband-wife team, and very often the actors intermarried, and the troupes became very much like clans.

An actor often portrayed an individual character for so long that they were known by the character's name, not their own.

Although there were hundreds of plays performed, very little remains. The collection *Il Teatro delle favole rappresentative* is one of the few collections of scenarios that are still available. The form of theatre itself did not really lend itself to written documents ... as more research is being done with a rise in popularity of Commedia in modern times, more collections of scenarios are surfacing.

A typical performance would change from one night to another of the same play, based on the audience response. The actors and *zannis* would take advantage of a responsive audience (the clowns playing to them for longer on a night when they got a good response and shorter on other nights), each actor had to be prepared for some strange turn in the dialog that hadn't occurred previously ... a scene that was minor one night, might end up as the climax of the show the next. This speaks of a lot of skill involved — the actors had to be fast thinkers and had to pay strong attention to the audience's reaction, as well as what each of the other actors was doing that night.

A *commedia* troupe did not perform comedias exclusively, however — they took great pride in performing other types of plays that had written dialog. Since each troupe depended so much on each actor, they seldom moved from one company to another. Most troupes remained together for years, and sometimes as children borne to actors in the troupe, the children as they matured took roles in the company to replace members who retired.

The influence of the *commedia dell'arte* on later forms of theatre is profound, and can be seen throughout Europe — plot devices, characters, and more can be found in Shakespeare, Moliere, and many others.

### Stock Characters

The following descriptions are a composite from several sources. The artists Maurice Sand and Jacques Callot (1592-1635) are often used as primary sources of information for the appearance of the characters. This is not a comprehensive list of the various stock characters, as there are too many to list here – it is listing of the more commonly found ones, at least based on the scenarios that we have been able to dig up.

A typical company usually included the following, although as noted one company may have some characters another might not, and vice versa, depending on the part of Italy the troupe was from:

**Pantalone** (Also, Pantaloon, Pangrazia the Bisceglia, Cassandro, Zanolbia, Cassandrino, Pasquale, Facanappa, Bernardone, The Baron, Gaultier-Garguille) (an elderly parent or guardian): the old, miserly rake of Venice.

- Once a successful tradesman or merchant, he is now retired. His body is pinched with age. His arthritic knees make it difficult to walk, but he is willing to shuffle (quickly) after a lady if the action is necessary.
- He may be a bachelor; if so he spends a lot of time making a fool of himself with young ladies.
- If married, he has a grown family (specifically a daughter, commonly Isabella), usually



Pantalone - From an engraving by Jacques Callot

he is trying to marry her off to a man of wealth without providing a dowry (usually attempting to get money from the intended groom ...)

- Careful of money usually, he is usually duped out of money by his wife, children, pretended lovers, and especially his servants.
- He is the original Rodney Dangerfield - he gets "no respect".
- Frequently accompanied by a servant (often Arlecchino).
- Part of the tradition is that Pantalone, despite infirmities of age, is athletic and often the most acrobatic of the troupe. Bad news causes a ridiculous back fall.

He takes pratfalls with all the vigor of youth and then immediately falls back into his usual stance of the infirm old man ...

*Costume:* In the mid 1500's, Pantalone was pictured in tight-fitting red trousers, short buttoned red jacket that is also tight fitting. The hat is red, brimless, close fitting and conical, typically like that of the dogs of Venice. He shuffles around in slippers (Turkish



Pantalone - From an engraving by Maurice Sand

with pointed toes most commonly). The robe is black lined in red. His belt supports a money bag and dagger, the dagger is never drawn, but worn improperly in front of the body, hanging between his legs (for comic effect).

*Mask:* Pantalone's mask portrays age. The face is shallow, sunken and bony. The coloring is brown. The nose is pronounced and hooked, and the eyebrows are accentuated. He has long, gray windswept eyebrows. The actor usually wore a jutting beard. Pantalone's profile is unique.

*Il Dottore:* The pompous, blowhard academician from Bologna.

- He was "born a learned man", just as lesser mortals are born beautiful or ugly.
- In the belief that wisdom commands respect, he buries men with verbiage.
- A common name for the *Dottore* is Gratiano.
- He is the know-it-all bore with the wrong answer for all occasions (Polonius from Hamlet is one of Shakespeare's renditions of this character).
- He takes himself very seriously, meddling in everyone's business, always advising, prescribing and explaining.
- He sometimes carries an impressive book in one hand, referring to it as he lectures.
- He often misquotes.
- The Doctor is obese and is therefore the least agile of the characters. His belly hangs over his belt, he sways as he walks with short steps.
- He shares some qualities with Pantalone: he is old, easily falls victim to the pranks of his servants, wages unsuccessful amorous adventures with young ladies, and his wife is likely making him a cuckold.
- The character began as a physician, but is sometimes shown as a lawyer, astronomer, mathematician or logician.

*Costume:* In keeping with the dress of real professors of the Bologna University of the time, his costume is black with a few white accents. A black frock with a wide white collar and white cuffs, the academic gown falls below his knees and is gathered with a belt at the waist. Black pants, a black cape. Black skullcap fits over the mask and hair.

*Mask:* The mask is black and only covers the forehead and nose, the single feature of the mask is the nose which is bulbous, but not so large as to cover the character's real mustache and rouged cheeks.



Il Dottore - From an engraving by Maurice Sands



Il Capitano - From an engraving by Maurice Sands

**Il Capitano** (also Spavento Della Valla Inferna, Giangurgolo Calabrese, Rogantino, Il Vappo, Scaramuccia, Scaramouche, Crispin): The swaggering, cowardly, braggart soldier - originally Italian, once Charles V controlled Italy, the artists turned him into a soldier from Spain.

- He talks a much better fight than he is capable of, finds pride in his fantasies.
- He is vain about his supposed good looks, and is convinced he can conquer any lady he chooses.
- If two capitano characters meet on the street, there is much posturing and threatening with swords, but nary a thrust ...

**Costume:** The earliest costumes were the same white as the zannis, with the addition of a cape, sword and wide-brimmed hat with long feathers. As the character became Spanish, the costume became tight-fitting trousers and jacket with red and yellow stripes, a huge starched ruff, plumed hat, garters or riding boots, and a dress sword with a fancy handle. Colored bands, ribbons, braids and shiny buttons added pomp to the ensemble.

**Mask:** The Capitano's mask was flesh colored and had an enormously long nose reminiscent of the early zannis. When the character began to mock the Spanish military, the mask had a heavy fake mustache and the nose became more phallic. Even later, one performer abandoned the use of the mask, so that he could do more with his own face. One script has him wearing glasses so the "terrific glare of his eyes may not put to shame the less ardent rays of the sun."



Il Capitano - From an engraving by Maurice Sands

**The Suitors** (Flavio, Ottavio, Orazio, Silvio, Leandro, Cinthio, etc; Isabella, Columbina, Francischina, Zerbinette, Fioranetta, Sylvia, Flaminia, Camille, etc.): Youthful, argumentative, scheming, and handsome/beautiful.

- They could be (and often were) children of other principal characters.
- They are expert in the arts of courtship (read The Art of Courtly Love, Andreas Capellanus) and are prolific writers of sonnets.
- They love, despair and are suspicious and jealous.
- They argue, are reconciled, and in the end, fly into each other's arms on their way toward the best possible marriage.
- The lover(s) (men): They usually went by the names of Flavio, Lelio, Leandro, Fabrizio, Ottavio, etc.
- The *inamorata* are the "beloved" of the lover(s), and went by names such as Isabella, Flaminia, Vittoria, Colombina, Camilla, or Lavinia.

**Costume/Mask:** The greatest asset of these characters was their comeliness, so no mask was worn, and costumes were based on the latest fashion ...

**Two or more zanni** — which might fall into the categories of a clever valet working in the interest of the hero, or a stupid lackey of the *dottore* or Pantalone ... but always a buffoon, ready to make comedy whenever and wherever the opportunity occurred. According to Rudin, *zanni* gives us the modern *zany*. *Zanni* may be the name of a character (being the Venetian diminutive of Giovanni), or it more generally references a generic character. *Zanni* is both plural and singular. The *zanni* include the following:

**Arlecchino** (later “Harlequin”, also Trivelino, Truffa, Truffaldin, Truffaldino, Guazzetto, Zaccagnino and Bagatino):

- He is the simple, childlike, innocent clown, and faithful valet.
- He is simple but not stupid.
- He sees the world through the eyes of the child - if he sees an apple and is hungry, he eats it without thinking that there might be an owner.
- His needs are simple - food and his love - Columbina.
- For him, everything is a game.
- He acts without thinking, and does not think about the future at all.
- He flinches a lot, because he gets hit a lot ... his movements are jerky and defensive.
- Back-flips and somersaults are appropriate if happy, and a rolling tumble backward is appropriate when his master strikes him.
- Falling is natural, and he picks himself up unhurt as a child would.

*Costume:* The traditional costume that we think of for the Harlequin, of a series of diamonds all patched together comes from garb that was patches and tatters (denoting poverty). A belt is usually worn, through which Arlecchino usually carries a slapstick, rather than a sword.

“The oldest known costumes of Trivelin and Harlequin – for they are one and the same person – were very different from the decorative dress with which most of us are familiar. There were varicoloured patches, darker than the background of the costume, sewn here and there on the breeches and the long jacket laced in front. A bat and a wallet hung from his belt. His head was shaved in the same manner as the ancient mimes’. His soft cap was in the mode of Charles IX, or François I, or of Henri II; it was almost always decorated with the tail of a rabbit, hare, or fox, or sometimes with a tuft of feathers. This attired had much definite character in itself, and might be considered a conventionalized and ironic treatment of the dress of a tatterdemalion.”

*Mask:* The mask of Arlecchino consisted of a half-mask, full crown and chin strap. It was black, with a row of stiff whiskers extending from the ears to form a mustache. The nose was small, round and slightly pug. A carbuncle grew from the forehead and the eye holes were small and perfectly round.

“Harlequin’s authentic mask consisted of a half-mask and black chin-piece. The eyebrows and beard were bushy and covered with stiff bristles. The forehead was strongly lined with wrinkles which accentuated the slightly quizzical arch of the eyebrows. The eyes were tiny holes beneath, and the *ensemble* gave a curious expression of craftiness, sensuality, and astonishment which was both disturbing and alluring. The huge wen under the eye, the wart, and the black colour completed the impression of something savage and fiendish. The mask suggested a cat, a satyr, and the sort of negro that the Renaissance painters portrayed.”



Arlecchino - From an engraving by Giuseppe Maria Mitelli



Brighella - From an engraving by Maurice Sands

**Brighella** (also Beltram da Milano, Flautino, Fenocchio and Truccagnino, Scapino, Mezzetino, Gandolin and Turlupin, Franca-Trippa and Fritellino): He is the manipulating drifter from Bergamo. The character changed from the early years of a likable trickster to a bizarre, disturbing criminal in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. "I have a special weakness for quarrels, and I always need at least two nice, tender young girls to satisfy me. And if murdering one man is not enough I'd just as lief kill two. You may remember, perhaps, the little tiff I once had when I gutted one man as easily as pricking a bladder, and broke the bones of another as I would crush a bean."

- He is a thief when he needs to be, his leather money bag is never empty.
- He carries a knife and murder is not out of the question if it will earn some money.
- His audience accepts his evil as "comic rascality", because it is broad and aimed at the common enemy - the wealthy.
- He is a man of great charisma and no conscience.

*Costume:* His garb started as all white, like all of the zanni, but later it evolved to servant's livery, decorated with green frogs, braids and chevrons. Accessories included a white mantle and a beret.

"His costume during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was composed of a jacket and full trousers, adorned with a braid of some sort of green material along the seams which gave it the aspect of livery. ... Brighella always carried a large leather purse and a trusty dagger at his side, both significant symbols of his taste and inclinations."

*Mask:* The earliest mask for Brighella was very close to that of Arlecchino, but was dark brown, the nose was flatter. The long sweeping cheek line more resembled a cheekbone than a mustache. The eye holes were cut large so the performer's eyes could be used expressively. Later masks (when the costume changed to green), the mask changed to an olive green. The etchings of Maurice Sands show Brighella with a sinister eyebrow and dark and deep set eyes. He wears a mustache made of real hair, that is twirled at the ends.



Brighella - artist unknown

"The bizarre, half-cynical, half-mawkish expression of his olive-tinted mask once seen is never forgotten. It is distinguished by a pair of sloe eyes, a hook nose, thick and sensual lips, a brutal chin bristling with a sparse beard, and finally the moustache of a fop, thick and twirled up at the ends in such a fashion as to give him an offensive, swaggering air."

**Pulcinella** (Also Meo-Patacca, Marco-Pepe, Il Sitonno, Birrichino, Polichinelle, Punchinello - Punch, Hanswurst): The cruel, selfish, humpbacked schizoid from Naples. He was the direct descendant of two characters from Roman theatre, Bucco and Maccus. At times, he identified with one of these fathers, and at others with the other. His character remained fluid, changing with the locale and actor portraying him.

- Despite any dual identity problems, all versions of Pulcinella showed the following traits: Self centered and self sufficient; quick, witty and capable of biting iron; coarse, vulgar (even obscene), dishonest and inclined to gluttony; adept with a stick, he could use it as an instrument of persuasion to win an argument.
- Usually he was portrayed as an aging bachelor.
- Pulcinella was hunchbacked (always) and had a potbelly. As the character evolved, the hump grew larger, and so did the potbelly (to balance him out).
- The puppet character "Punch" was based on Pulcinella.

*Costume:* He generally wore white, the long (mid-thigh) shift belted at the waist, white trousers. Conical sugar-loaf hat. "About his neck he knotted a sort of scarf bordered with green lace, which served both as a short mantle (*tabaro*) and collaretti, though it was not exactly either the one or the other. And on his head he sometimes wore a white skull-cap, and sometimes a grey hat with turn-up brims."

*Mask:* Pulcinella's mask was very dark brown or black. It had a worried, wrinkled brow, many warts, and a prominent parrot beak of a nose. Later masks took on a crudeness to match his cruelty and lack of refinement.



Pulcinella - From an engraving by Maurice Sands



EXAMPLE OF MASK WORN BY COVIELLO

From the "Carnavale Italiane Mascherato," by Fr. Bertelli (Venice)

Coviello - from an engraving by Fr. Bertelli.

**Coviello:** Zanni/Capitano from Naples. The musical and acrobatic talents of Arlecchino and the happy-go-lucky pomposity of Dottore.

*Costume:* Wears a white costume with bells. According to Rosa: "... wears the native costume, which consists of a jacket and breeches of black velvet, edged with silver braid"  
*Mask:* A large-nosed tan mask. Rosa notes: "He wears a mask which has flaming cheeks and a black nose and forehead."

*Characteristics:* One source notes: "The Captain inspires merriment by ... ; the Covielli by their grimaces and affected language ...". Salvator Rosa tells us: "Coviello is keen and subtle. He is sly, adroit, supple, and conceited. He has the accent of his birthplace, .... A character akin to that of Pulcinella: he favours all that is grotesque, obscene and mischievous."

**Tartaglia:** from the Italian verb for “to stammer”. A utility figure, an older man, often a friend of Dottore. Corpulent and pot-bellied, no facial hair and completely bald.

*Costume:* Grey cloth cap, ample calico collar, cloak and tunic in green with yellow stripes, white stockings and yellow or brown leather shoes.

*Mask:* Huge thick round green or light blue spectacles covering half his face.

*Characteristics:* A stammerer. Liable to get stuck on the most obscene syllable in any given phrase. The comedy does not lie only in the stutter but in the nature of the words he tries as alternatives in order to get past the block. ... Tartaglia flies into perpetual rages with himself and others when thus failing to communicate. As always in Commedia, there is a social reality behind a comical shortcoming: ‘He represents the southerner worn out by the climate, suffering from chronic ophthalmia, and in a condition bordering on cretinism.’

**Rosetta:** Servant. A maid or the wife of Pulcinella. Wore an Arlecchino-style patched dress.

### Other Characters

There were other characters, servants and such as well, and as needed for any specific play, including characters sometimes called “the minor masks”, such as Burattino, Coviello, Fiorinetta, Rosetta, etc.. Indeed, there are often servants with no lines who come on, do some piece of business at the demands of their masters and leave, such as beating another character, or what-have-you.



Rosetta and most likely Il Dottore (based on the mask),  
from an engraving by an unknown/credited artist.

### The Scenarios

There are many “stock” situations, sort of like football plays. While not ‘scripts’, per-se, they were used to give the actors the direction that they needed. These examples are taken from *Il Teatro delle favole rappresentative*. Rather than give the whole scenario (these are more lengthy than one might imagine), the author provides an “argument” at the beginning, which is a summary of the plot. These are still a bit more complicated than I had expected when I started reading and researching the topic ... somehow, it stuck in my mind that the plots were simple, but some of these rival Shakespeare for complexity (and indeed, there are some strong similarities in some of the plots to some of Shakespeare’s plays – which has not gone unnoticed by the translator who suggests that perhaps Shakespeare may have gotten ideas for some of his plays from these scenarios ...).

### The Tragic Events

There lived in Florence two gentlemen called Pantalone and Gratiano. They were of old and noble families, and bore a long hatred for each other. Each would try to do the other a bad turn whenever possible, and so their feud grew. It happened that Gratiano had a son named Captain Spavento and a daughter named Isabella. The Captain loved Flaminia, a daughter of his father’s enemy, who, in turn, loved the Captain, and he courted her in an honorable fashion. Flaminia’s brother, Oratio, discovered the Captain walking up and down before his house, and not knowing the reason, suspected that the Captain was driven by the same hatred as Gratiano, and that the Captain was looking for an opportunity to kill Pantalone, Oratio’s father. Finally, one day, Oratio attacked him and left him for dead. Afterward he fled to Rome where he stayed with a dear friend, a gentleman named Flavio. Meanwhile, the Captain recovered and persevered in his love, in spite of what happened. Oratio had fallen in love with Isabella, daughter of his enemy, and they exchanged love letters. Finally, Oratio, driven by his love for Isabella, and violating the term of banishment from Florence, returned. During that time, Isabella, unable to bear the suffering of her burning love, took, with the help of a physician, a potion that would put her into a death-like sleep; then she planned to steal out of the tomb and go to find her lover Oratio. Thus, on the same day, it happened that Oratio returned at the time that Isabella was believed dead. On his return, he also found his enemy, the Captain, whom the lovers had believed dead. He was then freed, as the comedy will show.



### **The Jealous Old Man**

In Venice lived an old merchant named Pantalone de Bisognosi who had a very beautiful young wife named Isabella. She was in love with a handsome and well-born young man of Venice named Oratio Cortesi. The old merchant was fiercely jealous of his young wife, and to keep her under his watchful eye, he decided to take her to his villa outside Venice. The lady was pursued there by her lover, and they arranged to meet in spite of her husband's vigilance. It happened then that a servant, talking as if in jest to the merchant, told him all that had been going on between the young wife and the young man. Thus, the old man was made to see his own impotence and folly in living a life of jealousy. Finally, in a very generous gesture, he gave his young wife in marriage to the young man.

### **The Faithful Friend**

There lived in Naples two young gentlemen, one called Oratio and the other Flavio; both were in love with a very lovely young lady named Isabella, daughter of one Pantalone de Bisognosi, a Venetian, first citizen of the city of Naples. Oratio was, in turn loved by the young lady, but meanwhile, he did not know of his friend's love. It happened that, counting on his faithful friend, he abducted the young lady and hid her in Flavio's house, where lived Flavio's sister, Flaminia, who was much in love with Oratio. Disguised as Isabella, she ran away. Meanwhile, Isabella remained in the possession of Flavio, who kept her for his friend Oratio; finally, after many adventures, the young men were left content and happy with their ladies and with their families.

### **The Two Disguised Gypsies**

There was in Rome a merchant named Pantalone de Bisognosi, a Venetian, who by marriage had two children, one named Oratio and the other Isabella. She was much loved by a young man named Flavio, son of a Bolognese doctor named Gratiano; she in turn loved him very much. It came about that Flavio was sent by his father on an important mission to Leone of France, and while on the sea, he was captured and enslaved by pirates. This news reached Isabella, who loved him so much that, with a servant, she went traveling through various parts of the world looking for him. She took jewels and money from her father, and when her money was spent, to save her honor and life, she went about disguised as a gypsy; they traveled about for a long time, and after much searching, they returned again to Rome. There she was recognized by her father, and after some time she found her lover and her brother, who, because of her disappearance, had gone mad; she finally married her lover as she had desired.

### **Part of a Scenario – The Twin Captains:**

The following is an excerpt from Act I of the The Twin Captains, (which the Golden Stag Players have performed several times) the original scenario as presented in *Il Teatro delle favole rappresentative*:

#### **ACT ONE**

#### **THE CITY OF ROME**

#### **ISABELLA, FRANCESCHINA**

Isabella enters with Franceschina, complaining to her servant that she is neither widowed nor married, for it is seven years since her father, Gratiano, married her to a captain. After six months, she says, the Captain left, saying he was going to Naples to find his brother. From that time she has heard nothing of him. She has become melancholy because of that, and because she has fallen in love with a gentleman named Oratio. Franceschina commends her love and praises Oratio, saying she knows him well.

#### **FLAMINIA**

Just then, Flaminia, who has heard all, comes out and says, "Signora Isabella, I advise you for your own good to put all thoughts of Oratio out of your mind." When Franceschina scolds her, Flaminia angrily calls her a slut, and after exchanging angry words, they come to blows.

#### **ORATIO**

At that, Oratio enters and forces them apart, showing tender feeling for Isabella. When Flaminia angrily turns on Oratio and gives him a tongue lashing, he reproves her; but she, only made more angry, says to him, "Oh, traitor, so you leave me for a slut." Franceschina calls her a liar and attacks her again.

As you can see, this is fairly detailed. The full scenario is about 6 pages in length and the Golden Stag Player production of it actually provides a play that is a bit over an hour in length.

### **Physical Comedy – The Lazzi**

Many of the Commedia scenarios reference "Lazzi" or an individual "Lazzo", which is a comedic routine that was well rehearsed and known to the individual actors portraying the characters. These routines often needed to be very well rehearsed, because otherwise someone could get hurt, as the routines involved a lot of physical comedy.

Some examples of Lazzi from Lazzi: The Comic Routines of the Commedia dell'Arte by Mel Gordon:

### **Lazzo of the Chase (1610)**

With a drawn sword, the Captain chases Coviello. They remain on the stage in a stationary position as they mime running, each slightly out of reach of the other. As they run, each begins to acknowledge the audience's response.

### **Lazzo of the Chairs (1610)**

Brandino is guarding Ottavio as they both sit in chairs. Attempting to escape, Ottavio moves his chair slightly. Brandino follows. Ottavio drags his chair halfway across the stage with Brandino in pursuit. They smile at each other. This continues.

### **Lazzo of the Luggage (1610)**

Arriving in the city, the Captain and Burattino both carry heavy luggage. The Captain asks Burattino if he can hold onto his luggage for a minute and starts to walk away. Burattino replies that he has to tie his shoe and gives the Captain all the luggage, who promptly throws it back at Burattino.

### **Lazzo of Looking Everywhere and Finding Nothing (1618)**

Zanni is asked to find an object or person right in front of him. Looking everywhere but at that spot, Zanni announces that it's not there.

## **Putting It All Together**

A Commedia troupe basically worked with Stock Characters, a Scenario, and Lazzi. They used masks, they used sets if they had them (earlier troupes had less sophisticated sets than later ones, and of course a traveling troupe tended to have less sophisticated sets as well), they of course had whatever props were needed.

Commedia is considered to be one of the earliest forms of improvisational theatre. The only reason that it could work is that the actors would know their characters inside and out, as mentioned earlier. Given a specific scenario, and details for what lazzi to use, the actors would then be able to produce a play that would delight the audiences, and yet be different from one night to another.

As mentioned previously, a performance could easily change from one night to the next, depending on the audience's reaction to a specific joke, or a specific course of action. The important thing was getting from point A to point B to point C and to the finale, with no loose-ends hanging in the story. As long as the actors got there, the job was well-done.

Dario Fo mentions in his book The Tricks of the Trade, that there is on record a description of a troupe who were doing a show and got interrupted by a bee that refused to go away. It distracted the actors, but they worked the bee into what they were doing, including chasing this bee out into the audience, hitting audience members trying to kill it, and more. The audience loved the show, even though it bore no resemblance to the original performance/scenario. So, the next night the actors created a fake bee, and tried to replicate what had happened the night before. Of course, it didn't work as well the second time, but it still entertained the audience. This is just one example of how things can change a performance when you are doing improvisational theatre.

## **SOURCES**

Commedia dell'Arte An Actor's Handbook, John Rudlin, Routledge, 1994, ISBN: 0-415-04770-6

Commedia dell'Arte: A Handbook for Troupes, John Rudlin and Olly Crick, Pub: Routledge, ISBN: 2001 0-415-20409-7

The Prop Builder's Mask-Making Handbook, Thurston James, Betterway Publications, 1990, ISBN: 1-55870-167-2

The Italian Comedy, Pierre Lous Duchartre, Dover, ISBN: 0-486-21679-9

Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre, Keith Johnstone, Pub: Routledge, 1987, ISBN: 0-87830-117-8

The Tricks of the Trade, Dario Fo, Pub: Routledge, 1991 ISBN: 0-87830-008-2

Scenarios of the Commedia dell'Arte: Flaminio Scala's *Il Teatro delle favole rappresentative*, Translated by Henry F. Salerno, New York University Press, 1967, ISBN: 0-87910-133-4

The Commedia dell'arte in Naples: A Bilingual Edition of the 176 Casamarciano Scenarios vols 1 and 2., Cotticelli, Francesco, Anne Goodrich Heck, and Thomas F. Heck, trans and ed., Lanham, MD Scarecrow Press Inc, 2001, ISBN: 0-8108-4116-9

Lazzi: The Comic Routines of the Commedia dell'Arte, Mel Gordon, Pub: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1983 ISBN: 0-933826-69-9

The Golden Stag Players website: <http://www.goldenstag.net/players> – includes photos, and details on performances, a bibliography, and much more.