

GOOD TO KNOW!

A curious playgoer's guide



A History of Commedia dell'Arte

ORIGINS AND EARLY HISTORY

Commedia dell'Arte originated on the Italian streets in the 16th century, but it went on to become one of the most enduring theatrical styles in history, influencing generations of humorists and writers.

In its early years, Commedia was a form of entertainment for members of trade guilds – groups of tradesmen who came together after work to make some entertainment through amateur dramatics. Commonly performed in the market square or as part of a carnival, Commedia took place on the streets wherever passers-by would watch.

Limited scenery, long nose masks, a few props, acrobatics and music were features of this early form, initially known as Commedia di Zanni. As the name suggests, this type of performance only featured Zanni



characters: an archetypal fool whose thought process was governed by physical and carnal needs. The comedy of these early plays relied on crude and often violent humor between the Zanni.

Il Magnifico character was introduced to mirror the wealthy, powerful landowners of the time, presenting the ideal countermask to Zanni. The most notable Magnifico type was Pantalone, based on the miserly merchants seen on the docks in Venice who traded gold. Pantalone's mask bears a hook nose, wrinkled lines and pursed lips and is typically played as an old, arthritic man who wrings his hands and protects his purse at all costs. More characters emerged to round out the traditional Commedia company and reflect and mock Italian society (see Page 3 for stock character profiles).

STRUCTURE AND CHARACTERISTICS

The traveling Commedia troupes consisted of 12 or so professional performers, each a specialist in his or her character. There were no playwrights or directors. The company manager (capocomico) would announce the title and theme of an evening's performance, making a scenario available to the performers.

Most scenarios are approximately three pages long and describe the basic plot points of the story with character entrances and exits indicated. The dialogue was not scripted for comedies. Using the framework of the scenario, actors would collaborate together to improvise a unique performance at every show. The complicated story of intrigue, deception, despair, and ultimately happy ending was seasoned 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, on the other hand, live, in-the-moment spontaneity.

RISING POPULARITY

A key moment in theatrical history took place in the 1560s when women entered the stage. Until this point all characters

were played by men but it was a famous troupe, il Gelosi, which began a revolution in theatre by introducing an actress, unmasked, as an Innamorati: a Lover. Women on stage caused a sensation with shock and gossip, attracting voyeurs as well as considerable criticism, but the result was a surge in popularity for Commedia dell'Arte. The female Lover was soon paired with an unmasked male Lover. These characters appeared as the children of the Old Men and enabled storylines to take on new depth and complexity.

Commedia actors moved from the streets, being invited to perform in courts and palaces and before long, were performing in theatres built for the purpose of professional stage shows. The 17th century was the Golden Era for Commedia dell'Arte as Italian comics dominated the European stage and the star system was born, firmly establishing acting as a legitimate trade. Commedia began to be replicated in cities across Europe, becoming particularly popular in France in the court of Louis XIV where it became the Comédie-Italienne. His favors changed around the turn of the century and Commedia performers were eventually banned from the stage; those remaining in the country were designated to street performing, which was itself restricted by a series of censorship laws (one of which was the disallowment of dialogue, from which "Good Devil" took its inspiration).

INFLUENCE

Quite notably, many if not the majority of comic plays from roughly the 16th-19th centuries have clear influences from the commedia dell'arte, including spinoffs from the traditional characters. Some examples include Shakespeare's "The Tempest," with a fairly traditional commedia plot structure (Prospero matching up to the part of Il Dottore, and Ferdanand and Miranda as innamorati); Beaumarchais' "Le Barbier de Séville," which features a traditional plot, innamorati (The Count and Rosine) the zanni Brighella (Figaro) and the vecchio Dottore (Doctor Bartholo); and Rostand's "Cyrano de Bergerac," with Roxanne as innamorata and Cyrano as Il Capitano/innamorato.

Molière was strongly influenced by commedia, as he had come in contact with travelling Italian actors in the provinces and worked alongside a troupe in Paris for two years. Harpagon in "The Miser" (1668) was modeled on Pantalone,

and there are traces of other stock characters in the play. The playwright was also a lead actor, and performed in the comedic style, with a love for physical humor.

The long-lasting impact of commedia can be seen centuries later, with traces in the slapstick humor of Charlie Chaplin and the Marx Brothers as well as the broadly painted characters of "The Simpsons."

***Special thanks to Faction of Fools' Curriculum Guide for information and insight!**

Classic Lazzi

Lazzi (singular: lazzo) were jokes – comic "bits" or gags. Each character had his or her own typical lazzi; a good commedia performer would have dozens of lazzi that they could draw on in any situation.

Some popular, classic lazzi include:

LAZZO OF THE TOOTH EXTRACTOR: The Doctor fools Pantalone into thinking that rotten teeth are causing his obnoxious breath. Using oversized or ridiculous tools, the Doctor extracts two or more good teeth from Pantalone's mouth.

LAZZO OF THE CHASE: With a drawn sword, the Captain chases Arlecchino. 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: 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: Arriving in the city, the Captain and Burattino both carry heavy luggage. The Captain asks Burattino to hold his bags 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: 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.

Meet the Commedia stock characters

The style of Commedia is characterized by its use of masks, improvisation, physical comedy, and recognizable character types. These characters were originally for comedic purposes only, but soon expanded into a full repertoire of personalities, many of whom poked fun at various figures in Italian society and represented different levels of the social hierarchy. Performers usually specified in portraying a single character, and while characters were always recognizable by their masks, costumes, and mannerisms, Commedia performers were experts at making roles their own through *lazzi* and other forms of improvisation.

The Spittituchi Troupe in “Good Devil” reflects a traditional Commedia company in many ways, including its use of four prominent stock characters:

(1) Colombia (a *lazzi*/servant character): Often the only functional intellect on the stage, she usually aids her mistress in gaining the affections of her one true love. Although sometimes flirtatious and impudent, she never loses her judgment.

(2) Isabella & Lelio (the young Lovers or *Innamorati*): Graceful, young, and fashionable, the lovers’ plight lays the groundwork for the most common Commedia plot, which pits them against their unforgiving fathers. While always sincere, these characters are rarely intelligent or humble.

(3) Il Dotore (another *Vecchi*): Egotistical and obsessed with accumulating knowledge, one scholar describes him as having “spent his whole life learning everything without understanding anything.” His pride trumps concerns—including the emotional well-being of his son/daughter.

(4) Pantalone (an Old Man, *Vecchi*): Like Il Dotore, he is often father to a troubled young lover, and equally as unweilding to their plight. The original Ebenezer Scrooge, he is miserly and self-absorbed, interested only in attaining wealth.



Which Commedia Character are You?

1. Your business partner has just gambled away all of your proceeds. You:

- a. Weep and bemoan the loss of your cash box as if it were your first-born child.
- b. Use your wits and charm to win all of the proceeds back.
- c. Scoff; money is merely a social construct designed to keep the common man common!
- d. Adapt the tragedy into a woeful ballad for your beloved.

2. A messenger from the King is approaching! What do you most fear he will ban?

- a. Untaxed commodities for the rich.
- b. Extramarital sex.
- c. Open access to public libraries.
- d. Non-arranged marriages.

3. Your only child has declared their dream of becoming an artist. Thoughts?

- a. What kind of namby-pamby practice is that? Have you ever met a not-poor artist?
- b. Ill-advised and unrealistic? Sure. But who am I to judge?
- c. I shall send them to the best academy for the arts in the country—no, the world—no, the universe!
- d. Let them follow their heart, of course.

4. What's most likely hiding in your corset/pantaloons right now?

- a. My overstuffed wallet.
- b. My...assets...but I wouldn't say they're "hiding."
- c. An entire encyclopedia! Who says print is dead?
- d. Parchment and a quill, the better to woo my lover with.

5. Your favorite Commedia troupe is performing in your town's piazza next month! What's your course of action?

- a. Laugh at the imbeciles dolling out their life savings on a measly theatre ticket.

- b. Flirt your way to a free ticket.
- c. Attend the event as research for an upcoming article on the sociological intersection of humor and morality.
- d. Plan an entire date weekend around the event for you and your true love.

6. The Devil has stolen your voice! How do you proceed?

- a. Force your son to communicate for you (why spend good money on a translator?).
- b. Body language.
- c. Research ancient forms of nonverbal communication, become an expert, and win many awards for your work.
- d. Go into hiding with your beloved. Language can't describe true love, so who needs it?

7. What do you plan on binge-watching this summer?

- a. Mad Men
- b. Buffy the Vampire Slayer
- c. Anything British
- d. The Bachelor

8. And, most importantly, which candidate has your support this election season?

- a. Trump, of course! Steal from the poor, give to the rich!
- b. Hillary. There's nothing I like more than a powerful pantsuit and feminist message.
- c. Bernie! I want a candidate who questions the status quo and puts the bourgeoisie in their bousie place.

ANSWERS

(See Character Descriptions on Page 3)

Mostly A's: Pantalone
Mostly B's: Colombina
Mostly C's: Il Dottore
Mostly D's: A lover