

Performing Commedia

– a resource for
drama teachers



~2020~

Thank you to Daniel Lynch and the wonderful drama students at Aberfoyle Park High School and to MELC for their financial support to help continue the Commedia dell'Arte forward in a 21st century Australian context.

History of Commedia

First known contract signed by a group of players: 25th Feb 1545, Padua, Italy. This date is considered the birthday of Commedia. On this day, many companies around the world share in celebrating this: www.commediadellarteday.org During the 13th-14th centuries, Venice became a cultural fusion of East meets West. The Mediterranean Sea connects people, empires and civilizations of North Africa, Asia, and Europe through trade. Although trade routes were designed for the exchange of goods and materials they became a way to share religion, ideas, languages, art, science, and technology. Persian Fables, Chinese Allegories (which inspired Carlo Gozzi's work), and Moorish Dancing from North Africa were very popular in Venice and Naples, which are the two main geographical regions of Commedia dell'Arte. With so much cultural infusion going on, there is ample evidence to suggest that Commedia dell'Arte was inspired by various theatrical conventions introduced to Italy from the East.

Why Commedia?

16th century Commedia was known to include all types of theatre. It is a genre that can be used to teach a range of skills such as:

- characterisation / postures
- body awareness,
- voice / language
- gesture,
- physical theatre,
- clown,
- movement / dance
- mask
- slapstick
- stage fighting
- comic duo / comic timing
- acting
- stage presence
- audience interaction
- improvisation / devising

Importance of Commedia

- 1) Payment for actors – recognition of 'actor' as a profession
- 2) During the 1560s women began performing on the stage. Isabella Andreini was the first female to join a Commedia company. She played the female lover and her name, Isabella, became one of the most famous names for the female lover.

The difficulty with Commedia

The Italian players were so successful that they eventually sold themselves out. Commedia started as an oral tradition. It wasn't until the time of Goldoni when people started to write about Commedia. This was problematic for the Italian Players. Scala did publish a collection of his plays in the 16th century but only fragments of information concerning how to play commedia (the techniques)

survived. Being highly popular during the 17th century, Commedia players travelled across Europe and many artists from each country quickly formed companies of their own and created their own versions of Commedia. Over time, the essence of the original form of Commedia was lost and myths about began to generate. As Rudlin puts it, *'every era has tended to reinvent Commedia in its own image, often relying solely on an increasingly simplistic reinterpretation of the confection of its predecessor Eventually such a mixture was bound to become so dilute as to be ineffectual'* (1994, p. 9).

Hierarchy

Masters: Pantalone & Dottore

Captains: Capitano & Signora

Lovers: Isabella & Flavio

1st Servants: Pedrolino, Colombina, Scapino, Brighella...

2nd Servants: Arlecchino, Bagattino, Truffaldino, Pulcinella...

Commedia Principles (according to Antonio Fava)

For a Commedia play to exist, Fava says it must have:

- Archetypes (characters from each of the 5 groups above)
- Improvisation (devising the play and spontaneous play with the audience – eg: a mobile phone rings)
- Masks (both masked and non-masked characters)
- Multilingualism (various languages or playing with one language)

Archetypes vs. Individual characters

There is no “star” or “lead” in Commedia. Though performances tend to centre around the lovers getting married, each key character should have equal time on the stage: so give equal weight to the lives of Pantalone, Dottore, Capitano and 2 servants for example, as well as to the lovers. A Commedia play can and does exist without Arlecchino! He is just 1 name, of 1000 names of the 2nd servants.

Basic Human Necessities (BHN)

Commedia plays are about everyday people doing everyday things. It is their BHN that drives them during the play. These necessities expose their frailties and this is where the comedy is found. Commedia characters represent the extreme version of the world they live in. All is possible physically if the BHN is clear. E.g.: Pantalone’s main BHN is greed. He struggles to get out of bed in the morning so he throws away one of his coins. This “loss of money” gives him the ability to catapult / cartwheel / flip out of bed, collect his coin (this is important), and proceed with his day. If Pantalone did not collect his coin in this mini lazzo, then his BHN would not be clear.

Mask work

Masked characters: Old men, Capitano, most servants.

Unmasked: Signora, both lovers, Pedrolino and Colombina (two 1st servants).

As a general rule, females are unmasked and males are masked. The male lover and Pedrolino are the exception to this rule, as is Ricciolina (2nd servant).

Lowest point for chin is always parallel to the floor. Dropping further results in a ‘dead mask’.

Try to keep the mask facing the audience or profile. Do not show top of or back of head.

When moving about the stage, the mask leads. If you turn left or right, the mask turns first, followed by the body.

Stage Fighting with Staffs (long wooden broom handles):

A stage fight scene **must never be improvised** live on stage.

Two hands must remain on the stick at all times, and as far away from the point of contact as possible. Following these cues will help your fellow actor to anticipate the next move (vital should they forget the choreography!).

Basic position: stand facing your partner, hold stick horizontally with arms by your side and hands at either end of the stick.

HEAD:

Attacker: Stick rests on head.

Receiver: As stick comes forward to strike head, receiver steps forward with arms straight and at 45-degree angle away from head.

NECK:

Attacker: Stick rests on shoulder as if holding a baseball bat. Attacker swings stick to hit the neck of the receiver.

Receiver: From basic position, moves stick to a diagonal position, straight arms, to block the strike. Top arm should be above head so face can still be seen.

WAIST:

Attacker: Stick rests on waist with stick pointing away from receiver. Attacker swings stick to hit the waist of the receiver.

Receiver: From basic position, moves stick to a diagonal position, straight arms, to block the strike. Top arm should be below head so face can still be seen. A slight bend in the waist is needed so the receiver is low enough to block.

KNEE:

Attacker: Stick rests on knee with stick pointing away from receiver. Attacker swings stick to hit the knee of the receiver.

Receiver: From basic position, stick goes from horizontal to vertical, both hands now at top of stick. Receiver lunges forward and diagonal over the knee being 'hit' and plants stick in front of knee to block the strike.

FEET:

Attacker: Stick rests on the floor with stick pointing away from receiver. Attacker moves stick across the floor in a circle ensuring the stick remains on the floor.

Receiver: From basic position, jumps over the stick with both feet at the same time.

The attacker can help the receiver by moving the stick quickly under the receiver's feet.

Slapsticks (short clapping sticks)

The term slapstick originated from Commedia dell'Arte as a multipurpose tool created by a servant: two pieces of wood tied together by string. The name was later used for a whole genre "slapstick comedy".

Every servant carries a slapstick at all times. You are only limited by your own imagination as to what the slapstick can do. As long as you don't mime (e.g. pretending it's a guitar and you're strumming it), all is acceptable.

Slapsticks are used for: cooking, cleaning, resting, scratching, showering, brushing hair, painting nails, catching flies, music, and of course...hitting!

Hitting: slapsticks are designed to create a loud noise on minimum impact.

Always 'hit' your fellow actor on fleshy parts of their body. Never strike directly on bones/head/face.

Why hit?

Masters can 'punish' their servants if they do something wrong.

A servant wouldn't hit a master unless it was an "accident" E.g.: In the heat of the moment, Pedrolino might "accidentally" hit Signora while trying to dress her.

Servants can sneak up on each other, tease each other, hit each other...they don't necessarily need a reason.

Propeller hit:

Two servants stand side by side, one slapstick width apart.

Both hold a slapstick with their 'inside' hand. 1 servant moves arm with slapstick in a forwards motion, over their head and eventually hits the other servant on the bottom. This causes the servant being hit to jump and move their arm forward with the slapstick, which eventually hits the first servant. This action is repeated. Servants might be arguing about who is going to do the task the master has ordered.

Face to Face:

Actors stand facing each other. The one hitting measures distance so their arm is straight and middle finger can touch the chin of fellow actor. The attacker pulls arm back and goes to hit the receiver's face. The receiver drops chin and moves head in the direction that follows the hit. The sound is given by the slapstick, with the attacker striking their own leg or bottom in time. This can be extended by both actors spinning, and with the receiver spitting out tic-tacs.

Stomach punches:

Actors stand side by side with arms on each other's shoulders. The attackers 'fake' punches the other in the stomach, momentarily turning their back to the audience to mask this. The receiver jumps up and kicks feet forward while bringing stomach in to create the illusion they are being punched in the stomach.

Hair pulling:

Attacker puts their fist on the receiver's head. The receiver uses both of their hands to cover the fist. The receiver is in control of the direction in which both actors move.

There should be lost of talking, sounds, screaming and movement (acting /reacting) here!

Archetypes: BHN, basic positions and walks

Servants

BHN: Food/Sleep – servants live outside and represent the poor people in our society. They live a humble life but make do with what they have. While they are tired and hungry, they are happy. They are eager to work because they know it will result in payment = food.

Basic position: begin in 1st position (ballet)

Bend knees and elbows.

Stick bottom out and shoulders back: think ‘C’ shape with spine.

Right foot slightly forward, all of weight on left leg/hip.

Left arm forward, right arm back, all toes on floor.

Grand Zanni Step (big servant step)

From basic position: arms extend out and to shoulder height as leg scoops forward (soccer ball kick). At the same time, torso shifts from reverse ‘C’ to forward ‘C’. Bent elbows and knees remain.

Two-time Step

From basic position: feet kick forward and hands “chop” in front. Feet lead, so ideally you need to lean back as far as possible. Rationale: Feet know it is time to “escape”, message hasn’t been received by brain yet.

Tired Servant Step (Zanni Stanco)

From basic position: reverse of two-time step. All the head wants to do is lay on the floor and sleep. Each step is the feet trying to keep the head up. Feet drag behind, arms and shoulders are heavy, chin parallel to floor, forward lean to show the weight of the head.

Dance/Happy Step

From basic position: If right foot and left arm are forward in basic position – right foot step, left foot steps to join back of right foot, right foot takes another step forward. Here, arms switch so right arm is forward and left arm is behind. Now, left foot steps forward, right foot steps to join back of left foot, left foot takes another step forward.

Pedrolino

BHN: He wants to be Signora and is commonly her personal servant. He receives privileges that the other servants don’t, e.g.: he sleeps inside, in a bed, has a meal every day. Although working for Signora is a terrible job, Pedrolino knows that his life is good and so puts up with her. Pedrolino is a germ-a-phobe and doesn’t like to fight or get dirty. Pedrolino can do all of the above steps but in his own “Pedrolino” style.

Pedrolino walk: still keeping the bent knees and elbows (but not as extreme as the servants). Chest moves forward as arms pull back (chicken like). Feet, in 'V' shape, take small steps forward.

Lovers

BHN: Love

Basic position: think leaning tower of Pisa. Maintain diagonal shape. Back leg is straight, front leg is the support. Arms open and extended.

Walk/Run: Heart leads. One foot in the direction of the movement, the other facing the audience. Back leg crosses in front of forward leg. Leaps, jumps, any ballet moves are all possible here.

When the lovers are in love they lean towards each other. When the lovers are rejected or out of love, they lean away from each other.

Captains – these are the only two characters where the torso twists.

Capitano: BHN – to be the best / the winner / the number one

Muscle step. Holding his stick. Heel toe, torso twists and shoulders roll back and forth to showcase all of his muscles. Capitano is always on show, however he often trips and falls so a quick recovery must always be added. Chin high.

Signora: BHN – Power / Control / Top dog

Toe heel, torso twists. This is very controlled so not to have any problems with wig falling off. Out in public, Signora is very steady. Even to turn a corner is prepared – she looks to the new direction, stops, reverses and does a 3-point turn. Arms stay close to her and chin is high.

Masters – can do all the walks from the archetypes but in their own physicality and with their own limitations.

Pantalone: BHN – money/ greed

Basic position is similar to servants but with shoulders forward and curved back. Think Mr Burns with “excellent” hands. Pantalone is thin, short and his eyes are at chest height of the other characters. Hands up to grab boobs, hands down to grab arse! Walk is a heel toe half step shuffle.

Dottore: BHN – Gluttony / Finest foods / likes to talk a lot about his work

Basic position - lean back to highlight his enormous stomach. Arms rest on stomach. Chin high, as eyes need to be able to look over and around his stomach. There is a slight bounce to him (fat takes a long time to stop wobbling). Toe heel half step shuffle. He jumps and thumps the floor to call the attention of people, or when he has a great idea.

Lazzi

The Italian players would perform one character for their entire life. Each actor would have with them a 'bag of tricks' that they could rely on and quickly insert into any commedia play should the need arise. E.g.: if a fellow actor did not enter when they were supposed to then the actors on stage would do a few lazzi. These

lazzi are pre-rehearsed and memorised, they were never entirely improvised on stage.

Servants (sleep machine)

Group of servants take up a range of physical positions that connect. The idea here is that each actor is a cog in a machine – one movement makes another movement occur. This is a very vocal and physically entertaining lazzo and should be able to repeat itself a number of times. When the actor is not doing their movement, they should be doing things servants would be doing in their sleep: scratching, farting, snoring, dreaming of food etc. The slapsticks should also be used to add to the sound and “accidental” slaps that take place. This lazzo can end by a master (either on or off stage) calling out something like, “Zanni (servants) – get back to work!” All servants stop what they are doing and race off to avoid getting into trouble. It is also used to start and end a play.

Lovers (meeting)

Flavio and Isabella are either off stage or on opposite sides of the stage. Flavio calls for Isabella (in the most beautiful way possible), Isabella calls for Flavio in the same way. Both run to each other, not realising the other has moved, they cross and reach the other person's original position. They can't find each other. They turn and realise they have crossed. They call for each other again and repeat the same above. This occurs three times with a well-timed simultaneous leap. Eventually they meet, hands almost touching. There is lots of energy and tension. They can't wait to be married! They talk about all the things they will do/have after they are married...this escalates. This lazzo could be extended and become a fight. E.g.: they talk about how many children they will have 1, 3, 4, 7, and then it becomes an argument and they break up.

Love messages

Flavio and Isabella ask a servant to deliver their love messages to each other. You can modernise this by making this text messages, Facebook, or another app. The lovers speak in a well-educated and rich language. This is foreign to the servant who speaks a low level of English. A servant tries to deliver the messages as best as he can (he knows if he does a good job he will be paid and can buy food). However, the language and speed in which the lovers dictate their messages to him cause him to get the messages confused and jumbled up. This leads to the lovers shifting from absolute happiness to absolute despair and they eventually break up. The lazzo ends with the servant finding a resolution to restore the love between the lovers.

Capitano (war monologue)

The first time the audience meets Capitano, they meet the “war hero” – well, that's the impression Capitano wants to give. He is a narcissistic, egotistic, alpha-male who invents elaborate stories and constantly shows off in an attempt to hide the fact that he is actually a coward. Sure, he “won” the war. But that is only because he was hiding behind a big rock and was the last man standing at the end (though he would never admit this to anyone). This is a time when mime is possible as Capitano is telling events from the past. Whatever he says he must re-enact using his stick as a prop.

“My name is Il Capitano (insert very long surname here) the third, and I have just won the war. To win the war I (invent your own story here and act it out). And that is how I won the war. Thank you, thank you, save your applause...I'll be here all night (etc.)”.

Capitano is also a “ladies man” (well, he thinks he is!) so any and every attempt to pick up some of the women in the audience (or on stage) is taken.

Capitano vs. Capitano (bridge)

Two Capitani enter. There is a bridge and only one can pass at a time. Both try to convince the other that they are indeed the superior Capitano and should pass first. They both try to win at various silly games and competitions: who has the biggest statue, who has the longest name, who has slept with the most women, who has won the most wars, who can do the most push-ups, who has the best trick etc. Nothing works. Eventually the ‘threat’ of a fight is offered – This might be in the way of a dance off. The lazzo ends with the pair crossing each other without realising it and then thanking the other for letting them cross first.

Old Men (wedding contract)

Pantalone and Dottore meet to discuss the financial contract of their children getting married. They are old friends and have a love/hate relationship: two old men who generally get along but bicker about everything. Pantalone does not want to spend any money and would prefer a very cheap wedding, whereas Dottore wants a lavish wedding with the finest food and top shelf wine. Their opposing body mass allows for much humour and this should be extended upon as much as possible. On entrance there should be 3-5 physical gags before the pair get down to business. E.g.: Dottore thinks Pantalone is a chair, Pantalone gets squashed or bounces off of Dottore. The pair struggles to help each other get off the floor. Something could happen that results in Pantalone on Dottore’s back, or visa-versa that could have hilarious results. When they finally meet they discuss the upcoming wedding. It’s a constant negotiation with their BHN driving the conversation. More physical humour should take place. E.g.: Pantalone hears he should pay \$50000, he has a heart attack and faints, and Dottore performs CPR (but is using this opportunity to lecture the audience about the various steps to giving CPR instead). Lazzo ends with the contract signed and agreed upon.

Signora and Capitano (the sandwich and after)

This lazzo is in two parts.

Part A – Capitano and Signora enter – they are hot, saucy, ready to rip each other’s clothes off and have a great time together. A sex scene would never take place in a commedia play, but it is certainly implied. The idea here is to allow the audience to think the pair is talking about sex – the filthier the better!

The lazzo starts with Capitano asking Signora to join him for a bite to eat (sandwich, pizza, spaghetti and meat balls...whatever you fancy!). As the pair discusses the ingredients and/or method of eating the audience is lead to believe that they aren’t planning to eat anything at all! E.g.:

Capitano: ‘Signora (sniffing her up and down), fancy a bite?’

Signora: (feeling Capitano’s huge muscles) ‘Capitano, one bite is never enough!’

Capitano: ‘Oh Signora, trust me...there will be lots of biting.’

Signora: ‘Tell me Capitano, what exactly do you want to bite?’

Capitano: 'Well, (feeling her body) I like to sink my teeth into something soft'
...And this continues until the pair can't resist and rush off the stage together.
Referring to Capitano's stick and using it in various ways should be included.

A few scenes later...

Part B – the next time the audience sees this pair it needs to be a follow up from the lazzo above. Here the pair swagger back on, maybe Signora is wearing Capitano's shirt, or visa-versa. They take up the whole stage:

Signora: 'Capitano, that was delicious...'

C: 'That was yummy...'

...This continues for a bit until it is revealed that they did in fact eat the dish they were describing, and the servants (or Pedrolino) prepared it for them, thus allowing the audience to laugh at themselves for having such dirty minds!

Pedrolino & Signora (getting dressed)

Signora is getting ready for Capitano's arrival (or for another reason) and she must look her best. She spares no expense on ensuring she is "beautiful". She is mutton dressed as lamb! She wears dresses two sizes too small, shoes that are a size 7 when she's really a 10 and there are lots of issues with putting on corsets and getting her hair, nails and makeup done. Pedrolino is at her beck and call, he can't seem to do anything right. There is ample opportunity for physical humour: Signora is bent over a chair while Pedrolino has his foot in her back while trying to do up the laces on the corset. Signora is on the ground and Pedrolino is trying to shove her large foot into a tiny shoe. Pedrolino is brushing her hair and her hair gets tangled in his slapstick. This results in a huge chunk of hair being ripped out! Signora is so "turned on" by Capitano's arrival that she gets herself too flustered and the only way to calm her down is for Pedrolino to slap her. A servant would never hit a master but in this scene Pedrolino can certainly take "accidental revenge" on his mistress! The lazzo ends with Signora dressed and Pedrolino exhausted.

Performance: Lots of singing, dancing, live music, acrobatics, tumbling, and more can and should be in every Commedia dell'Arte play!

Costume

Early on, Italian players wore simple costumes and relied on basic props, mask and strong physicality and voice to convey their characters. Basic whites are fine for every character. You can then add a scarf for the lovers, hats for captains, belts and t-towels for servants and maybe a big bib with food stains for Dottore and a coin purse for Pantalone. A black cap made from leggings or sleeves is worn to hide hair and to create the illusion that the mask is the actual face.

Script vs. Improv

To respect the early Italian players, my preference is to create Commedia plays from scratch using a devising method. The plays are rehearsed to a point where dialogue is fixed and memorised by the ensemble. Rather than writing down a line-by-line script, a *canovaccio*, which describes the general plot of each scene, is created.

Real Time

To add to the hilarity of the play, it should be done in real time. This means that the wedding will be taking place in 45mins-1 hour, depending on how long your play is. There is never “a few days later or a few days before” – everything happens on that day in that moment. Gags can be inserted about time with the lovers becoming more and more frantic when they realise there is only 7mins left, then 3mins left before they are to be married. Of course, all the other characters can have a reaction to the time and speed in which things need to get done or be resolved too.

Audience interaction

Where possible the audience should be involved. When Capitano enters the audience could stand and applaud or encouraged to ‘ooh’ and ‘aah’. When the lovers are looking for each other, they could wander through the audience. Signora and Capitano can flirt with the audience. Pantalone might count the audience members (who are guests at the wedding) and have a heart attack, as there are too many of them.

Canovaccio

- Act 1: All the main/key characters are introduced. There is lots of excitement. Everyone is happy! The lovers are in love, the servants are happy to see them getting married, all is well!
- Act 2: The character that is the catalyst for the errors could be introduced here (Filomena – the jealous ex-girlfriend). The snowball of errors starts. It gets out of control. The lovers, by no fault of their own, are no longer getting married. The servants are called to try to resolve this, but they only make matters worse.
- Act 3: All is resolved. One character is blamed for all of the problems and is punished in some way. E.g.: Pantalone is made to pay for the whole wedding! The lovers are reunited and the wedding can go ahead (which is in the fourth act that we never see).

Lesson Plans / Unit of Study (10 weeks – 2 single, 1 double lesson each week).

For weeks 1-4:

1 single lesson should focus on theory: understanding the history and connecting that history to a present day society and context.

1 single lesson should focus on refining the practical elements that are covered in the double lesson. Special attention to developing / extending upon lazzo, devising dialogue and precision of gestures.

Double lessons are for physically learning the walks, postures, gestures, interactions of all the characters, as well as mask work, stage fighting and slapstick work.

For weeks 5-8:

Double lesson is for creating the performance, single lessons are for refining or extending upon the scenes developed during the double lesson, and/or working on costume, masks, sets, lighting, props, etc.

For weeks 9-10:

All lessons are based around rehearsing the performance until performance day.

Week 1:

Introduction to Commedia - history, culture, influences, then and now, relevance, archetypes and connection to society.

Week 2:

Master & Lovers

Week 3:

Servants

Week 4:

Captains

Week 5:

Plot development – establishing a basic outline of the play

Week 6:

Scene and lazzi creation

Week 7:

Scene and lazzi refinement

Week 8:

Costumes, Masks, Sets, Props, Lights, Sound

Week 9:

Rehearsals

Week 10:

Dress rehearsal and performance(s).



Image of Commedia kit by Corinna Di Niro (2019)
From left top: Pantalone, Zanni, Dottore
From left bottom: Arlecchino, Capitano
Also featured: 2 slapsticks.

Suggestion for cast sizes:

6-7 students per group will allow for students to play multiple characters and give the audience the sense of a full ensemble.

With a set of 5 masks, groups can include all the necessary characters, as some do not require a mask.

Masked: Pantalone, Dottore, Capitano, and some servants

Un-masked: Lovers, Signora, Pedrolino, Colombina.

Pictures from the Performing Commedia program at Aberfoyle Park High School (2019):



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