Fools & Flirts
Improvised Comedy of the Italian Renaissance

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Barony of the Cleftlands

Image: oil painting, c. 1580. Believed to depict Isabella Andreini and the Compagnia dei Gelosi. Unknown artist.

An Introduction to *Commedia dell'Arte*

Commedia dell'Arte. *Commedia all'Improvviso. Commedia Mercenaria.*
Comedy by professionals. Comedy by improvisation. Comedy by payment.
All these are names and apt descriptions. But what is commedia?

> ***Commedia dell'Arte* is:**
> - a theatrical art from born in the later decades of the **Sixteenth Century** in northern **Italy**, consisting of
> - troupes of **professional actors** (i.e. *paid*) who often performed in
> - **half-face masks** constructed from that represented
> - **stock characters** of extreme archetypes of human nature to
> - **improvise** both dialogue and action to a
> - brief outline of the plot called a ***scenario*** and using
> - short planned gags called ***lazzi***, that became
> - **internationally famous** and employed
> - the first **women on stage**, and has had a
> - **lasting impact** on theatre culture ever since.

A Brief History of *Commedia dell'Arte*

Sixteenth Century Italy was in the fever of the Renaissance with art and theatre in high demand. Revivals of Roman comedies were common and new extreme farces were written. Rich patrons would hire players to stage a performance at a party. Quite often these actors would take the comic relief roles and leave with experience in comedic theatre.

At the same time, the rising mercantile class was looking for better ways to attract attention to their wares, hiring street performers to juggle, do acrobatics, busk, and perform short skits. In scenes described as ***commedia zannesca***, a master would have to contend with foolish, tricky, greedy, and lazy servants, already using inspiration from stock character of old that would lead to the well-known stock characters of *commedia dell'arte*.

Soon actors looked to stop being hired show-by-show and began to form troupes as professional performers. Concurrently, wealthy sponsors looked to be a patron for these troupes, often to help them advertise or be involved with the profits. While it's possible troupes existed prior, the first known record of a troupe filing a legal contract of incorporation came on February 25, 1545 when Ser Maphio's players in Padua established themselves as a ***fraternal compagnia*** – thus making acting into a legitimate business.

In the following decades, numerous commedia troupes would appear throughout northern Italy and some further south on the peninsula and even in Spain. While some performances were done in the street (often on specially built platform stages) many were done in full theatre houses, some built expressly for the purpose of commedia players. Troupes went on expansive tours and had fan clubs. Rivalry – both competitive and friendly – could exist between actors and troupes, sometimes played up so a scandal can sell tickets.

Very quickly, commedia became one of the most popular forms of entertainment in Western Europe.

The Commedia Mask

Masks have been used in theatre around the world for thousands of years. In the Sixteenth Century, some troupes claimed lineage back to the ancient of comedies of Rome and Greece but this was more bragging than legitimacy. It's possibly they were inspired by mask use in classical theatre or known accounts in the Middle Ages. Masks in the *Carnevale* festivals is also a likely inspiration.

Masks may have been employed in *commedia zannesca* and were very quickly common to all commedia troupes. Typically made of leather and custom-made to the actor's face, each mask represents a specific character and thus easily identifiable to an audience. The masks are often exaggerated with large noses, long or hooked, massive wrinkles, carbuncles or warts, creating grotesque characters to add to the farce. Unlike many theatrical masks, these leave the actor's mouth and jaw exposed, permitting him to fully enunciate and use vocal expressions.

The Stock Characters

Each mask represents a different stock character (often also called a *Mask*) and these were typically used in every play. These characters are extreme exaggerations of human nature, both archetype and stereotype. Many are similar to the stock characters in the *Atellanae fabulae* of Rome and may have been inspired by revivals of those farces. But these are stock characters because of how universal they are; the comedy of almost every culture has similar characters that are tropes.

Using stock characters benefits both the audience and the actor. The character uses his mask, unique costume, voice, movement, and behavior to be immediately identifiable to the audience. Much of the humor in the play is heightened by the viewer understanding who the character is and how he or she will react to the circumstances. Meanwhile, the actor can hone this characterization over the course of numerous plays (as most actors would stick with the same character for years if not their entire career). The actor would easily know how their character would react to any situation.

NOTE: The descriptions on the follow page use both traditional and modern interpretation of characters, such as dividing the *servetta* into different character traits. You may not see all of these characters in the historic plays but they will often appear in modern adaptations of commedia.

(Above) Arlecchino mask by unknown artist
(Below) Zanni mask by Martha Sicking, 2010.

Common Stock Characters in Commedia

- *Vecchi*: the old men, middle class household patriarchs, fathers to the lovers
    - **Pantalone**: miser extraordinaire; decrepit but believes he's a virile lady's man
    - **il Dottore**: bombastic know-it-all scholar who actually knows only nonsense
- *Zanni*: male servants from the country; often lazy, greedy, and tricky
    - **Arlecchino**: often happy-go-lucky, always hungry, harlequin fool in patchwork
    - **Brighella**: scheming and greedy conman considered very charismatic
    - **Pedrolino**: clever valet servant who can be a trickster; wears baggy long sleeves
- *Servetta*: female made servants, often clever and bawdy, attached to the *zanni*.
    - **Franceschina**: early maid, could be foolish or clever, motherly to the *amorosa*
    - **Colombina**: later maid, sassy, sexy, and sarcastic; an experienced big sister
    - **Smeraldina**: foolish maid, companion to Arlecchino (modern interpretation)
- **Lovers** and **Fighters**: those who romantic and marriage plots the play revolves around
    - *Innamorati* (*amorosi*): flighty, shallow lovers who can't solve their problems
    - **Isabella**: clever *prima donna amorosa*, sometimes disguised as a man (**Fabritio**)
    - **Vittoria**: scheming *amorosa*, sometimes black widow (modern interpretation)
    - **il Capitano**: braggart Spanish soldier and womanizer who is secretly a coward
- **Other Masks**
    - **Pulcinella**: violent and sociopathic hunchback of southern commedia
    - **Fiorinetta**: experienced courtesan, lusted after or sought for advice
    - **Laura & Rosaura**: the amorous and cuckolding wives of the *vecchi*
    - **la Ruffina**: an old lady who could be a beggar, a gypsy, a courtesan, mother, etc
    - **Coviello**: a servant who thinks he's bettered himself (almost a wannabe Capitano)
    - **Scapino**: quick of body and mind, a tricky servant but with more reasonable goals
    - **Cola & Cassandro**: old men even more ancient than Pantalone
    - **Tartalgia**: clerk whose stuttering causes accidentally inappropriate situations

*See **page 9** for more details on the stock characters*

Joh. Jacob Schübler delin.   Joh. Balth. Probst Sculpsit.   Cum Pr. Sac. Cæs. Maj. & M. Probst Heered. Exc. A. V. & formis communi. Aug. V.

Improvising to a Brief Outline Scenario

Some of the predecessors to *commedia dell'arte* were scripted theatre, including *commedia erudite*. These were often written by scholars, clergy, and members of the wealthiest families. Some of these characters and plots would inspire the later *commedia all'improvviso*. The street busking scenes were probably both improvised and scripted (with the later possibly being developed from devised theatre techniques).

From its earliest days, *commedia dell'arte* was semi-improvisational. It's been called "actors' theatre" because the players did not need to adhere to a playwright or a director. Instead, the performers could improvise their dialogue and actions. This allowed every member of the troupe to contribute and well experienced players could maximize the comedic flow.

Arlequin & Zany, Fossard, 1577

The lack of writing down a script also aided in avoiding many censorship laws. The play could be bawdy and risqué and offensive but no physical evidence remained to prove the crime beyond hearsay.

These plays were not fully improvised, though. Instead the actors used a brief outline of the general plot of the play including what happened in each scene but the actors could control the specific dialogue and action. This outline is called a *scenario*, named as such because the written summary was affixed to the back of the scenery for the actors to review when off stage.

The term *canovaccio* can be used as a synonym for scenario and was so named because it was attached to the back of the canvas of the set. The *canovaccio* could be the entire play or a more brief outline of the plot without the stage business of entrances and exits.

Argumento is also used for the concept of the play as well as the brief summary of the general plot before a written scenario, sometimes including backstory and sometimes including a description of the play itself. In Period productions, the *argumento* was sometimes given as an opening narration before the actual play (a welcoming segment called a *buon giorno*) to provide details and help explain what the audience was about to witness.

Most commedia *scenarii* follow a similar formula. The two old *vecchi* are neighbors and fathers to some or all the *amorosi* who have goals for their love life. However, the old men have different goals. In come the servants to help the lovers, help the old men, run their own plots and schemes, or foolishly complicate the mess. Characters from outside the two families (like Capitano) complete matters by being an unsuitable suitor or romantic rival, possibly with their own schemes at the expense of one or both the households. After three acts of much confusion (usually involving misunderstandings, mispairings, crossdressing, chase scenes, and naughtiness) the helpful servants success unite the *innamorati* with their true loves, convince the fathers to agree, foil the crimes, and run the villains out of town or to the city watch.

The Comedic Stage Business of the *Lazzo*

Not everything was entirely made up. To aid the players, each actor had a list of previously memorized *lazzi* he or she could pull from. The closest English translation to *lazzo* is "comedic stage business". These could include verbal gags, physical gags, running gags, or short scenes. They could be done by both singular and multiple characters. *Lazzi* could be repeated in many different shows and audiences could sometimes remember and participate such as repeated catch phrases. Typically, these gags were not meant to impact the plot though sometimes they could be part of moving the story forward.

A few examples of *lazzi*:
- Capitano's name or boasting catchphrase, repeated each time he enters
- calling for the foolish servant(s) several times before they actually enter
- how the lovers approach and greet each other
- teaching someone how to walk like the opposite gender (often poorly)
- hungry servant imagining food and pretending to eat it
- a lover's poem to her or his beloved
- reciting a ludicrous chain of events or reasoning and believing it makes sense
- a *zanni*'s stylized pratfall
- a specific word or phrase that always evokes the same exaggerated reactions
- stumbling about in the dark of night or deep fog
- repeating the same story over and over again as each character enters
- a foolish servant always trying to run the wrong direction

The First International Celebrities

All of this came together to form incredibly popular comedy. Troupes began touring the various city-states of Italy but soon to other nations as well. France especially loved *commedia dell'arte* where the slapstick and farce was accessible even without translation (though part of the success can be attributed to many of the French Court knowing Italian due more than queen of the era being part of the Medici family. i

Engravings of Isabella and Francesco Andrieni, actors and troupe leaders of i Gelosi

Gelosi, the most famous troupe of the time, was repeatedly invited by King Henri III of France. During one tour they were kidnapped by the rebelling Huguenots and the king quickly paid the ransom. More than once the French aristocracy banned commedia performances down, thinking too bawdy for public decency and encouraging of lewd behavior but the royalty demanded they go on.

Commedia troupes also traveled to other countries including Germany, Poland, and Spain. In the later, local actors were inspired to start their own commedia troupes. Commedia came to the shores of England but didn't find much transaction, due to the lack of Italian

speakers, dislike and mistrust of Catholics, and a general morality against the more controversial elements of commedia. However, it would leave a great impact on the English playwrights and actors of the time including William Shakespeare.

Women as Women on Stage

Part of the popularity in *commedia dell'arte* had to come from casting women to play the female roles. This probably started in the 1540s and women were definitely on stage by 1566 when Vincenza Armani performed in Mantua. In most locations it was illegal for a woman to act; it was shocking, it was scandalous, and most of all it was profitable! The attention it brought and the money it made soon encouraged every troupe cast women. So this was both a milestone in women empowerment – but was also done because "sex sells".

In the earliest days of *commedia zannesca* and *commedia dell'arte*, the female parts were played by men, usually as female *zanni* servants called *zagne*. The different between the *zagne* and the *zanni* is minor: both wore masks and were similar grotesque, bodily creatures with the same attitudes and foibles. However, the troupes did not want to put actual women in masks and cover up the pretty faces that were attracting all the intention and soon the beautiful young *innamorata* was born along with her hansom male *innamorato*. The female *servetta* maids also went maskless and, because they were acted by actual women, acted like actual women and not the men in drag of the earlier *zagne*.

A rare example of a masked woman in Period is the character of la Ruffiana (though it's possibly she was sometimes played by a man even after women began to act). The mask could be a holdover from an earlier time or used to represent the extreme advanced years of the character.

Women were not just pretty faces on stage. They were known to be well educated and help write the plays and lead the troupes. The two most famous actresses of the time, Isabella Andrieni and Vittoria Piisimi, both spent time as the head of their companies. Isabella published several volumes of poetry and Vittoria was also famous as a musician and given the title "divine". The fame brought in the crowds, especially when their rivalry was played up, perhaps part friendly and part competitive. While on tour with Gelosi in France, Isabella died during childbirth near Lyon. The city held a public funeral and day of mourning as well printing medallions with Isabella's face the words *aeterna fama*: eternal fame.

Portrait of a Woman with a Dog (1585-1588) by Paulo Veronese; oil on canvas painting proposed to be Isabella Andrieni

The Lasting Influence of *Commedia dell'Arte*

The heyday of commedia was in the second half of the Sixteenth Century and the Seventeenth. As new restrictive censorship and decency laws and new theatre arose, commedia's popularity began to wane. However, commedia saw a rival in Paris as *comedie Italienne* in both theatre and opera; Pierrot and Scaramouche, descendants of commedia, became well known in opera. The French legacy would lead to the harlequinade in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries which brought the recognizable characters of Harlequin, Columbine, and Pantaloon to England and influenced ballet. The buffoonery of the harlequinade would lead into Vaudeville and onto comedic movies, television, and cartoons in the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries.

When certain performances with live actors were outlawed, some commedia characters became puppets. Punch and Judy are Pulcinella and his wife (and Scaramouche often makes an appearance). Burrantino became more famous as a marionette than a commedia mask (and in Italy the story of Pinocchio is instead called Burrantino). Censorship on dialogue led to certain pantomime arts and dance, encouraging the popularity of the silent Pierrot who went on to become the sad white-faced clown of circuses while Arlecchino in his patchwork evolved into the colorful and happy harlequin clown.

Several words in English can trace their origins back to *commedia dell'arte*. Zany comes from *zanni*. Slapstick as an art was inspired by the use of an actual slapstick in commedia. Scenario stems from the Italian term for the plot outline pinned the scenery. It's possible the phrase "full of baloney" is derived from Dottore's claimed *alma mater* of the University of Bologna. And give that Pantalone provided his name to the garment pantaloons which was later shortened, we can safely say without *commedia dell'arte* we would all be pantsless!

In the Society for Creative Anachronism, *commedia dell'arte* has seen a revival. For much of the SCA's history, there have been commedia troupes creating new Renaissance theatre. In the East Kingdom is i Sebastiani, active for nearly half that time and famous in their own right, winning comedy festivals and being published in textbooks. i Genissii has been performing in Æthlemarc for more than fifteen years. The Midrealm boasts two commedia troupes: i Scandali in the south and i Verdi Confusi to the north centered on the Barony of the Cleftlands. In the past five years, commedia education has expanded including Iron Commedia workshop begun by i Verdi Confusi and now being practiced in multiple kingdoms. Several new troupes have appeared including i Firenzi and Vegando Stolti in Atlantia and La Mezze Lune in the East.

Commedia dell'arte is alive and well even in the Twenty-first Century!

Commedia All Stars at Pennsic War 44 with players from troupes:

i Firenzi
i Genissi
Le Mezze Lune
i Scandali
i Sebastiani
Vegando Stolti
i Verdi Confusi

Vecchi. Literally, the old men. They are middle class and of some wealth and status in the city, the patriarchs of their households. They are fathers to the young romantic characters and employers of the servants. They typically engineer the obstacles to their children's romance. Typically, the setting of commedia is a street outside of their two houses. These neighborhoods could be friends or rivals – sometimes in the same play!

Pantalone is the miser extraordinaire. Making money and never spending it is his primary goal. He's very old and feeble but he still believes he's a potent lady's man. He'll often refuse to let his child marry because he's hoping for a more financially powerful arrangement. He's easy to anger.

il Dottore (meaning "doctor" in Italian) claims to be an expert scholar on any subject, often a lawyer and sometimes a medical doctor. He's fond of good food, wine, and occasionally women but fonder of his own voice. This bombastic know-it-all is more a know-nothing and his supposed education from the esteemed University of Bologna is full of baloney!

Zanni are the male servants to the *vecchi*. Originally they were all nameless country bumpkins, prone to being lazy, greedy, foolish, lustful, gluttonous, and tricky. As commedia grew, the *zanni* became their own unique characters. Many plays had a first *zanni* and second *zanni* dynamic, reminiscent of the straight man / funny man routine of comedy.

Arlecchino is the most famous character from *commedia dell'arte*. He is in both name and personality the harlequin. Usually foolish, this second *zanni* is always hungry, lazy, and easily confused. The earliest Arlecchino was lustful and overall a man of his desires without a filter. He was typically acrobatic in his pratfalls. Often happy-go-lucky, he was caught up in the schemes of others but usually came out on top in the end. Arlecchino is known for wearing colorful patchwork.

Brighella is the scheming first *zanni* conman. He's a high ranking servant or his own small business owner. Though clear to the audience he's a criminal, he's very charismatic to the other characters. He likes money, influence, and secrets and will do anything to get them and better himself. He has little respect for anyone else but his belief in his own cleverness is often his downfall as his tricks will be foiled by the idiots around him.

Pedrolino could be either a first or second *zanni*. The earliest Pedrolino was a clever servant and valet to the *amoroso*. Sometimes prone to pranks, he was the one who had to resolve the chaos and fix everything, even while being frustrated by the foolishness around him. However, later interpretations of the character (possibly post-Period but the type influential in history) turned Pedrolino into a near infantile and almost mute servant ranked beneath even Arlecchino. Both versions were without mask (often with white face make-up) and baggy white costume with ludicrously long sleeves.

Servetta is a female servant, a maid of the household. They are more down-to-earth than the *amorosi*, often more experienced and sexual. The earliest maids were rather foolish and frighteningly bawdy (usually leaving Pedrolino to fix all the problems) but later *servetta* were the smartest characters in the play. It was up to them to stop the bad guys and unite the lovers. The maids were never masked. They often ended up attached to one or more of the male *zanni*. Traditionally, the different names used did not differentiate the maids, but some modern interpretations have divided them into:

Franceschina was one of the earliest *servetta* maids. In many of the Period plays she is easily fooled and very lustful, sometimes scaring the men she's after. Later plays had her smart if forceful and intimidating. She can be like a mother to the *amorosa*.

Colombina was probably not a named used in Period but is very common in modern commedia shows. She's usually very clever, sassy, sarcastic, and sultry. She's not afraid to be outspoken about her love life and desires. She's often lusted after by the old men, the servants, and Capitano while being a fountain of information for the lovers. She can be like a big sister to the *amorosa*.

Smeraldina is a name that came well after Period but several successful portrayals of her have created a foolish female servant, often a companion to Arlecchino.

The Lovers and the Fighters

The ***innamorati*** or ***amorosi*** are the young lovers, sons and daughters to the *vecchi*. Most commedia plots revolve around their romantic attempts while others help or impede their desires. In traditional *commedia dell'arte*, they were considered straight and serious characters while the rest were the *parti ridicule*. In modern revivals, the lovers can be just as ridiculous. Typically they are unable to solve their own problems. They are often flighty and shallow but with good heart. The lovers never wore mask (except when in disguise) as they were to be visibly pretty. There are many names for the *amorosi*, the ones most often seen in historical documents and modern adaptations include **Isabella**, **Flaminia**, **Oratio**, **Flavio**, **Vittoria**, and **Cinzio**.

Isabella sometimes stands out from the other lovers. While she could be played just as dippy and clueless, many of the plays by i Gelosi in the Sixteenth Century made Isabella more clever, capable of enacting her plots and resolutions, often disguising herself as a man called **Fabritio**. She was named after Isabella Andrieni (nnee Canali), the most famous actor of *commedia dell'arte* and *prima donna amorosa* of Gelosi.

Vittoria was named after a contemporary of Isabella's and predecessor as i Gelosi's *prima donna*: Vittoria Piisimi. There's no evidence this character was played any differently than a typical lover in Period, based the reputation the real Vittoria had in a feud with Isabella, some modern troupes have developed the character of Vittoria as a schemer and sometimes black widow, more sexual and experienced than a normal *amorosa*.

il Capitano ("the captain") is the braggart and boastful Spanish solider, a self-proclaimed glorious hero on the battlefields of war and love. However, his intense bravado is a shield as he is truly a coward who will find any excuse to avoid danger as long as he can save face. He lusts after the ladies, both *amorosa* and *servetta* and in return is often desired by them (until they discover his true nature). He may be well experienced with women or that's also all talk. He could be a wannabe hero of the people, a conman, a stooge, or an outright villain. He was created to mock the Spaniards who recently conquered parts of Italy. His long nose was intentionally phallic and the only thing longer was his name. The most commonly used name is Spavento (with additional boasting) but many troupes would create their own.

Other Masks

Pulcinella is a well-known first *zanni* from southern Italy, especially around Naples. Possibly post Period, he was twisted in both his deformed hunchback body and his violent psychopathic mind. Yet he was often seen as a hero to the working class men as Pulcinella rebelled authority, including his boss, the law, and his wife. He would later evolve into the Punch puppet

Fiorinetta is an experienced courtesan. The *vecchi* and Capitano may have used her services and the *amorosi* come to her for advice. Often older than the *servetta* (whom she may have once employed or mentored) she is still sought after for her services.

la Ruffiana is a masked female character (possibly played by a man). She is usually very old and could play a variety of role such as a gypsy fortune teller, a courtesan (retired or active), a shop owner, or a long lost mother.

Laura and Rosaura are names for wives of the *vecchi*, seen less often as time went on (the old men being widowers). The wives would try to control and cuckold their husbands. They may have their own desires on whom their children should marry but often would help them find their true loves, sometimes just to spite their husbands. Capable of being jealous at the attempted trysts of the old men, the wives would chase after the young men in town or Capitano as well.

Coviello could be either played as another old man or as a servant who thinks he has bettered himself, becoming a bit of a braggart like Capitano even if he has less to boast about.

Scapino's name means "to scamper". He's a schemer like Brighella but usually less malicious, out for the fun. He moves quickly through the plot and back out, trying to avoid responsibility or punishment. He'll lust after the ladies but is more prone to desire the *servetta* than the *amorosa*.

Cola and **Cassandro** are names for other old men, often even older than Pantalone. Possibly his father or mentor, they're often used when setting up marriage match with an *amorosa* as the father wants access to the soon-to-die old man's money.

Tartaglia may also be slightly post Period and would later take Dottore's role as Pantalone's neighbor. Often used sparingly, he's a clerk who is required to deliver important information. However, as his name means, he constantly stutters, often accidentally saying things that sound incredibly inappropriate.

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