

## Italian: *Commedia dell'Arte*



With its origins in Renaissance Italy (early 16th Century) the *Commedia dell'Arte* was one of the earliest forms of theatre as we know it today. Starting with traveling troupes of street performers donning masks to draw attention to themselves, these players soon teamed-up and started taking on more defined characters, and *Commedia dell'Arte* was born. Starting in Italy, troupes moved into all of Europe, influencing theatre in Spain, Holland, Germany, Austria, England, and especially, France.

*Commedia* relied on the clever improvisation and specific comic "business" ('lazzi') that the players developed. Before going on-stage, actors would agree on a basic plot and a general idea of how it should be performed. The improvised performances were never subtle; the humor was often bawdy and coarse, taking the form of crude jokes, references to bodily functions or contemporary political satire.

Although the scenario changed for each play, the characters were consistent, removing the need to

explain to the audience who each one was. There were many characters in the *Commedia dell'Arte*, basically divided into three main camps - the masters and the servants, plus "the Lovers." The three main masters were 'Il Capitano', 'Pantalone' and 'Il Dottore' all of whom displayed various degrees of arrogance, stupidity and greed. These were served by the servants (either smart and devious, or rather stupid) always looking to get one over on their masters.

Arlecchino, a devious servant, was believed to be one of the first characters created and later developed into the character of 'Harlequin' that we are familiar with today. Also the term 'Slapstick' came from the wooden stick he wore at his side, designed to produce maximum noise when brought into contact with other characters during mock fights, etc.. Much of the impromptu entertainment would come from his antics, especially as much of his movement was acrobatic and slapstick in nature, combined with political satire. His movement was jerky or twitchy, moving around the stage in an almost dance-like manner. His costume was originally of tatty material with random patches – this developed into the diamonds on today's Harlequin costume.



### **Columbina**

A female servant or "servetta" frequently had the name of Columbina, though there were other versions of this character with a variety of different names. In early Commedia, Columbina was often played by a male actor, as a comic character. In the later 17th century she was played by women and became a younger, prettier, and wittier character, whose merry wit easily defeated the efforts of older lovers to capture her heart. She frequently joins hands with Arlecchino, both in adventure and in love.

### **Il Capitano**

A particularly pompous character, he could always be found bragging about his conquests in both love and war, only to be exposed as a cowardly liar by the end of the performance. He'd move from town to town, so no-one would find out his lack of rank, and keep the facade of bravery going by calling himself outrageously long, impressive names and putting on ridiculous performances of bravado for the townsfolk. Il Capitano would always stand (and walk) with his legs far apart and his chest puffed out, to emphasize his importance, often presenting himself proudly to the audience. This was backed-up by his military looking costume and sword (never drawn) - once more used to impress the other commedia characters. But his fear of confrontation and his complete failure as a lover would always come through. During Italy's confrontation with the Spanish (early 1500's), his character was used to represent Spain, enabling them to mock their enemy.

### **Il Dottore**

Often a neighbor of Pantalone, Il Dottore started life as a satire on Renaissance university men. A friend (or sometimes bitter enemy) of his neighbor, he would walk up and down in the long black gowns of either a lawyer or physician, spouting meaningless but important sounding Latin. He would hand out advice on subjects he knew nothing about (usually resulting in his own undoing), prescribe medicines of dangerous substances, and confuse everyone with his combination of truths and half-remembered half-truths, delivered with pompous and ridiculous mannerisms. Later his costume would acquire a white ruff and large black hat, reflecting the plague doctors of the time.

### **Pantalone**

Often portrayed as a merchant, Pantalone was a greedy and meddling old man. His costume would usually be tight fitting clothes, in an attempt to disguise his old age and attract the ladies. It would always fail to do so. Many storylines would revolve around Pantalone's misfortunes, be it financial, a threat to his authority or his poor attempts at wooing a lover. More often than not he was thwarted by a younger man, often his own son. In an attempt to show his authority he was usually costumed in red with the obligatory money purse, hanging from his belt. He was always hunched and moved in small shuffling motions - his reaction to bad news was always to fall on his back, only to recover with either help from other characters or leap up with loud, wheezing breath.



Other supporting characters were "the Lover's - two beautiful and unmasked young characters who were usually too full of themselves and each other to take any meaningful part in the performance, but the fact that they were in love was often used as the pivot of the storyline.

Since Commedia dell'Arte utilizes social satire, comic commentary and improvisation, one could argue that the continued invention of modern interpretations of Commedia is proof of its vitality and ability to thrive.

In **People Like Me 2002: Face to Face!** we present a modern troupe of narrators in the style and spirit of Commedia dell'Arte. Our Commedia characters are descendants of those from Italy, living in the present day, here and now, in northern California. While in traditional Commedia there are few if any roles for women, in our version, women play any and every role. We even introduce

Arlecchino /Arlecchina's mother! We strive to bring you the feeling, style, masks, and essence of Commedia, while taking liberties with content, as a traditional early Italian Commedia troupe might have done in their own time.

Our troupe includes Diane Wasnak and Jaron Hollander as primary narrators, and Txi Whizz and Ross Barrett who welcome the audience in a flurry of pre-show activity. All of these performers have a variety of skills and experience in the world of Commedia dell'Arte, clowning, music, and physical theater. Diane has performed with Cirque du Soleil, the Pickle Family Circus, and in numerous festivals, films and stage productions internationally. Jaron graduated from the Dell'Arte School of Physical Theater, and was a co-founding member of Impact Theater. Jaron's most recent work in the Bay Area was Impact Theatre's "Commedia 2000" and Make A Circus' summer 2000 tour "Zucchini's Unplugged." Txi Whizz has been on the senior staff of Camp Winnarainbow since 1983. Ross is an accomplished musician, has performed internationally, and is director of a Carnival Band. Txi and Ross have worked together as Fools Theatre over the last twenty years.

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