

# TOWARD THE ORIGINS OF THE ITALIAN COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE FROM THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY TO THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

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The reconstruction of the *commedia dell'arte* is a difficult task for two reasons. First, because this theatrical tradition was an early popular entertainment, performance history and records are poorly documented from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century. Second, the existence of the *commedia dell'arte* lay solely in performance. While a written plot outline called a *scenario* was a reality, there were no scripts, only handwritten notes in actors' personal diaries. Although the characters' personalities, costumes, and gestures were strictly controlled and remained the same from performance to performance, the dialogue was improvised and often risqué. Actors studied their roles, recycling the stock characters consistently through all their scenarios rather like a television sitcom. Performances were adjusted to audiences, local politics, and the actors' own dispositions. In the sense that no two performances were alike, the *commedia dell'arte* was a theatre of improvisation.

The actors of the *commedia dell'arte* began to appear at the end of the fifteenth century, but the term *commedia dell'arte* was not actually coined until the eighteenth century. The definition of the term is dependent upon the translation of the word *arte* which can be interpreted in two ways, as skill or as guild<sup>1</sup>. Historically both interpretations are correct because the *commedia* actors were both skillful and professional, and

created a theatrical phenomenon. Literally they concocted a satire before an audience using little more than their wits and a simple scenario. What began as popular street shows and carnival acts evolved into political satire of society's highest class—a nascent “Saturday Night Live” coming to you from Italy, France, Spain and England! The commedia developed a universal appeal as it spread from Italy to France, then to Spain and England, finally to all parts of Europe and eventually to the New World. Wherever it appeared it seemed to answer the needs of that particular culture.

Obviously more was involved than a few clever comedians. The history of the commedia dell'arte is complicated and abstruse due to a variety of influences that fed into it beginning with the nature of the performers' responses to the varied cultures in which they performed. For centuries the players collected material and acting techniques from many sources including traditional folklore. There are contending historical speculations concerning the commedia. One of these maintains that the genre was a self-contained art form dependent upon spontaneous improvisation; others that it was rooted in the interests of the popular masses; another, that it was low comedy shaped to a great extent by the acrobatic and physical routines of masked actors. Laura and Kenneth Richards steadfastly maintain that historically none of this speculation was the case. Rather they base the development of the commedia upon social change, economic needs and performer opportunism, a much more logical course of development. After all, the commedia players were professionals, vocally and physically disciplined, whose work was both

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1. Eleanora Luciano, *The Mask of Comedy: the Art of Italian Comedy* (Louisville, Kentucky: JB Speed Museum, 1990) 2.

calculated and accidental drawing strength from verbal and rhetorical force. Despite a troupe or company structure, material was peppered with traditional lore and popular experiences alike, even stretching into the regions of court culture and academia.

Because of these numerous facets, the *commedia* must not be dismissed as a theatre of masks and comedic improvisation, the notion that traditional art and modern scholars tend to emphasize. Artists from Watteau to Picasso have transformed and reinvented the characters of the *commedia dell'arte* sometimes with a personal significance that escapes the tradition of professional actors as organized companies, patrons as well as audiences, scripted as well as improvised situations. Most of all, the *commedia* rose out of the gross economic and social despair of the masses (Richards and Richards 1-30). Reconstruction of the *commedia* is perplexing because scholars are divided on matters of interpretation and origin which they base on the few existing early records and abundant visual evidence. Some of the most revealing and authentic archival records lie hidden in vintage police blotters. Contemporary personal letters and documents place the origins of the *commedia* near the end of the fifteenth century in Italy. Among abundant visual evidence, it is difficult to discern what is certain from what may be problematic. Like any artistic form, extant iconographic relics depend upon the artist's feeling for his subject matter, therefore the possibility exists that some of these artists may have taken license (6-10). The classic example of license-taking may exist in the engravings of Jacques Callot, the *Balli di Sfessania*, rendered over the period from 1618 to 1620. Although these grew from previous Italian illustrations and evidence, a grotesque *commedia* spirit breathes life from Callot's depictions. More important, they affirm what other sources have long deduced, that song

and dance were integral to the *commedia* performance. Other artistic renderings fail to identify scenes, figures or staging practices as thoroughly as does Callot's oeuvre, and consequently may be more generally than specifically faithful to the *commedia* (4-5).

In 1727 when Luigi Riccoboni, the original historian of the Italian stage, wrote in his *Histoire du theatre italien* of the similarities between the physicality of Arrlechino and the comic mimes of ancient Greece and Rome, the theory of classical origins was promulgated. It is true that the characters of the Atella comedies<sup>2</sup> were not unlike those who appeared in *commedia* in that they donned masks, improvised dialogue and honed mime to a fine art<sup>3</sup>. By the fifteenth century, mime theatre had lost favor with the Roman Catholic Church, the dominant power within Italian society, due to its foremost characteristic, its vulgarity. Adrian Pecknold explains that nothing was banned from performances which included "everything from intercourse to execution." Existing scenario and iconography support this explanation<sup>4</sup>. The authoritative text by Pierre Louis Duchartre, *The Italian Comedy* (1929) reproduces a graphic drawing of Dottore administering an enema to Arlecchino's exposed buttocks, for example, although the text describes the doctor as administering an injection with a syringe<sup>5</sup>. Pecknold, a modern writer and mime artist, ironically subscribes to the theory offered in the seventeenth century by

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2. Because these plays were popular in Atella, a city between Capua and Naples, the comedies assumed the appellation of the region.

3. Giacomo Oregli, *The Commedia dell'Arte*, trans. Lovett F. Edwards (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968) 1; also, Richards, plate 5.

4. Adrian Pecknold, *Mime* (Toronto: NC Press Limited, 1988) 13.

5. This is one of several graphic drawings following page 56 in Pierre Louis Duchartre, *The Italian Comedy*, trans. Randolph T. Weaver (New York: Dover, 1966).

Riccoboni, namely that the theatre of classical Rome and Greece somehow survived through the Dark Ages to become the *commedia dell'arte* of the fifteenth century despite the contention of scholars like Giacomo Oreglia who maintain that this notion was abandoned centuries ago.

In 1862 Maurice Sand, writing in *Masques et bouffons*, further expanded the Riccoboni theory suggesting that the masked characters of the *commedia* were direct descendants of ancient farce and mime. Like Riccoboni, he based his theory on the similarity of masks, costumes and props employed in the two theatres. J. A. Symonds, in *The Useless Memoirs of Count Carlo Gozzi* (1890), questions the theory of mask genealogy, although he does find credence in the notion of a distinction between the names *commedia erudita* and *commedia dell'arte*. While it is apparent from iconographic remains that a fine thread of similarity existed between characters who worked the ancient comedic stage in masks using improvisational technique and acrobatic mime, and those characters who appeared on the *commedia* stage, there was too much of an evidentiary hiatus between the two theatrical motivations for too many centuries to acknowledge an unbroken line between the two art forms. Therefore, in accord with the Richards, it is more sensible to assume that *commedia* companies drew upon their own folk traditions and experience, which may have had more than a nodding acquaintance with scholarly classics, to create the characters (Masks) associated since the sixteenth century with the *commedia dell'arte*. Winifred Smith based her support for Riccoboni's ideas on then current archeological discoveries<sup>6</sup>. It is the Richardses however, who debunk the Riccoboni

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6. Winifred Smith, *The Commedia dell'Arte* (New York: n.p., 1912).

theory on the basis that little concrete evidence survives the ancient classical theatre, making it impossible to do more than conjecture. There exist no written records, and much of the knowledge advanced by some modern scholars weighs on the paintings and raised designs on vases and frescos that have survived from the third, fourth and fifth centuries.

Perhaps the most sound support for Riccoboni is rendered by Allardyce Nicoll writing in 1931. In *Masks, Mimes and Miracles*, Nicoll discusses in detail the possibility of tracing the *commedia dell'arte* to ancient classical roots. According to him, popular comedy was brought to ancient Italy by traveling mimes who worked the streets and market places throughout Greece and Rome with their portable stages. Further, Nicoll advances what he considers to be a direct link with the classical artists. The comic actors of Greece, the *phlyakes*, appear to have been of two types, old men and young slaves with a few pseudo-heroes evident in the slave figures. Later, Roman classical theatre dissolved these masks into four distinct characters: an indulgent fool, a sly old hunchback, a silly braggart and a foolish old man. Linking these four masks with the four leading characters of the *commedia*, namely the two *vecci* and the two *zanni*<sup>7</sup>, appeals to Nicoll and Sand.

In the *commedia* tradition the *vecci* are foolish, gullible and sickly, but attempt to project an appearance of youth by chasing pretty young

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7. The *vecci*, heads of households, are old men (usually Pantalone and Dottore), and are considered the central characters in most scenarios. The plots revolve around conflicts and misunderstandings between the two. The servant is a kind of generic character identified in general terms as the *zanni*, and are lowest on the social ladder. Specifically he may be Arlecchino, or Brighella, or some other servant. The length of the nose on his face mask indicates the degree of his stupidity. Plots turn on the ability of the *zanni* to outwit his master.

girls. The classical connection between *vecci* and *zanni* was first made as early as 1589 by Nicolo Rossi in *Discorsi... Intorno alla Comedia*, although the Richardses note that the connection indicated by Rossi is not specific:

I would never number among plays those things peddled around by such miserable and mercenary creatures as call themselves Gianni of Bergamo, Francatrippa, Pantalone and similar buffoons, were we not able to liken them to Mimes, the Atellanae and the Planipedes of the ancients (qtd. in Richards and Richards 13).

It is known from excerpts of extant memoirs and diaries that the dramatic style originated in Italy early in the sixteenth century although the name itself, *commedia dell'arte*, did not appear until the eighteenth century (passim Nicoll). Today, as in centuries past, some scholars still attempt to trace the origins of the *commedia* back to the classical and popular theatres of ancient Rome. Because it is based largely on conjecture, other scholars refuse to accept this theory alluding instead to influencing elements from the Turkish puppet theatre, medieval comedy, carnival shows and circuses, all of which can be tracked through the *commedia*. It is evident, of course, that the comedies of Terence and Plautus were as readily accessible to *commedia* performers as they are to modern stage producers and playwrights, and undoubtedly offered inspiration for staging methods and performance technique. But then, everything was grist for the mill of the *commedia* performing artists.

In further consideration of the origins of the *commedia* it is germane to consider the name of this art form, *commedia dell'arte*. The designation signals a particular type of comedy performed by professional actors in companies and utilizing stock characters who improvised performances from simplistic plot outlines. The term was designed as an

attempt to restore honor and prestige to an art form that was dwindling in an age (the Age of Enlightenment) that had come to demand reality or naturalism from the art world. The peculiar grotesqueness of the *commedia* could not support this demand. While previously understood throughout the Middle Ages to mean *skill* or *craftsmanship*, the word finally came to mean *art* in the middle of the sixteenth century. The *commedia* players of the pre-Enlightenment Age called themselves *comici dell'arte*. At various times still other terms have been leveled on the art form, including *improvised comedy*, *comedy of masks* and *The Italian comedy*. These early *arte* companies (they were also called troupes) toured the countryside to find sufficient audiences to support them. Often they performed for meals alone, which made their work more of a survival skill than an artistic endeavor. Despite their economic dependence upon touring, the comedic players were accomplished professionals for the main. Consequently the world has come to acknowledge the survival theatre as the *commedia dell'arte*.

In many instances there are two classifications of Italian Renaissance drama: the *commedia erudita* and the *commedia dell'arte*. The *erudita*, a literary form based on scripts and inspired by the classics, was written and performed by the *dilettanti*, those amateurs for whom acting was an amusing pastime among the rich and famous. These scripted plays were presented in the courts and academies of the wealthy upper class. On the other hand, *commedia dell'arte* was the theatre of professional performing artists. While largely improvised, scenarios depended upon memorized bits of unscripted business called *lazzi*. Further, the *dell'arte* players depended upon their art for subsistence. Performances were given anywhere and everywhere from town streets and city squares to the halls and private theaters of the nobility. It was grass roots

theatre at its finest and created independent of a dramatist.

In the early sixteenth century Italy was experiencing radical economic depression. Exacerbating an economic downslide, the nation lacked political unity because of its division into large and small city-states. Further, in the south and parts of the north, Italy was suffering from the occupation of military invaders, largely Spanish troops, which introduced a problematic balance of power. While the cost of living soared, the poverty of the peasant classes increased. Crime and banditry left their imprint on the populace. The world of the common people was downright depressing. What was needed was an illusory world of escape and wish fulfillment. The market was ripe for a comic theatre. It took one man, Maphio dei Re from Padua, to see the need and supply that kind of theatre. In 1545 he gathered a group of men who signed a legal contract agreeing to a six-month engagement performing comedy on the road, something previously not done. Dei Re drew inspiration from his own experience and existing dramatic forms. While this survival strategy was questionable in light of the falling economy, the men continued with another road show the following year. It must be concluded that the venture was adequate if not profitable. Documentation indicates that the following year the contract was extended for a three-year run (Richards 44-48).

While little else is known about these entertainments, legal documents indicate that the original troupe disbanded in 1549, but apparently dei Re found new players, some of whom contracted themselves to the group for as long as six years. Not only did dei Re assume the role of company manager, he introduced and played the role of a comic servant called Zannini on stage, most likely the prototype of the later zanni who was to become known as Arlecchino. Clearly the organization was not

a moneymaker because records testify that dei Re, while still company manager, died penniless in a brawl in 1553. Nonetheless the show continued with a replacement in theatrical tradition<sup>8</sup>. Maphio dei Re was a pioneer. Not only did he organize a troupe of players professionally for the first time, he introduced the kind of theatre that provided a livelihood for actors rather than an indulgent pastime for well-to-do aristocrats entertaining the eclectic tastes of the wealthy. Rather Re's theatre developed from the tastes of common folk who were its ultimate audience.

The advance of the *commedia* was not without obstacles. The troupes at first resembled little more than groups of itinerant beggars, but by the end of the sixteenth century, the new dramatic form reached its artistic zenith. Not only were the troupes accepted as a necessary element of society, some professional companies emerged under royal patronage. Gradually the *commedia's* success spread out from Italy to the rest of the world. For two centuries *commedia* companies thrived. In the eighteenth century the troupes began to crumble under weighty economic pressures and the emergence of a new style of acting identified as realism. The magic in the spontaneous art form dissolved as scripted dialogue and *lazzi* (stage business) replaced the older art form until the twentieth century when theatre directors, playwrights and actors found inspiration once again in the inventions, popular appeal and distinctive features of the art form highlighted by the actors' stylized craft.

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8. Robert L. Erenstein, "The Rise and Fall of Commedia dell Arte," Classics in Context Festival, Actors Theatre of Louisville, Louisville, 19 October, 1990.

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