

## **Commedia Dell'arte**

Commedia Dell'arte is an early form of theatre which originated in Italy, and later spread throughout Europe in the 1500's to the 1700's. Actors of Commedia Dell'arte improvise within a set of stock characters, masks and comic situations; and it is namely these characteristics which distinguish this form of theatre from others. The stock characters and situations are hyperbolic representations of real life, hence at times adding a layer of seriousness to the comedy.

The status of the characters play an important role in Commedia Dell'arte. At the top of the hierarchy is the Magnifico, followed by the Innamorati (the lovers), and below them are the masters Pantalone and Dottore (doctor). The characters Brighella and Columbina are in between the masters and the servants. Underneath them are the Capitano (captain) and Arlecchino (harlequin servant). At the bottom are the zannis (servants).

Every character has their own physicality, drive, personality, plot contribution and mask (or no mask, in the case of the lovers). For example, Il Capitano is a classic example of a pretentious and vainglorious retired military man. While boasting about his self-claimed successes, he is in fact a coward who would run away in fright at the slightest danger. His walking style is slow and confident, however when frightened, he drops everything and screams in fear while making himself as small as possible. This is where the character contributes to the comic aspect to the comedy. On the other hand, the Innamorati are desperate and prideful lovers, with graceful and elegant physicality, however lacking life experiences. Their immaturity, conceited stupidity and desperation may cause comedy, however their sincerity in love creates a cultural layer to the act.

From Commedia Dell'arte developed classic jokes and pranks, called burle and lazzi. These would in the earlier days be well rehearsed scenarios, however nowadays they tend to be improvised. It could include for example Arlecchino putting a bucket of water over the door, so that when a fellow zanni opened it the next day, it would pour on top of them. However, when

the day came, Arlecchino himself forgot the bucket and opened the door, causing him to get soaked from head to toe.

Commedia Dell'arte is a wonderful template for actors to creatively express themselves in, however, there could be some limitations to it. One of the main disadvantages to the way it is organized into stock characters and situations is that the scenarios will repeat themselves as more and more people perform it. This can eventually lead to the show losing its vitality, which according to Britannica was also the cause to Commedia Dell'arte's decline in the late 18th century.

In Commedia Dell'arte, the actor is not just an actor; they are the creator of the art, the writer of the story. This is the beauty of Commedia Dell'arte, however also its disadvantage. This form of theatre requires more skill from the actor; the actor has to adapt their body, desire and mind to the character while constantly depicting and improvising humorous chains of events. Due to this complexity of Commedia Dell'arte, actors who are less skilled will find it hard to perform and will prefer other forms of scripted theatre. As a result, the show will either lose quality because of the difficulty, or the performances will be less popular since only few will (or are willing to) play it competently.

## Bibliography

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