

The Sets, Props, and Costumes of the Commedia Dell'Arte

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Commedia dell'Arte

Commedia dell'arte, or 'vulgar comedy', which it is sometimes referred to by, has its roots in oral storytelling and ritual acts within human groups. The style of improvised comedy that the practice owns is a significant example of drawing on the subconscious, primitive fears and desires that also produce the stories of our dreams. Low comedy as a genre is commedia while high comedy parallels tragedy theatre, played indoors in grand theatres for social elites. Tragedies have scripts, clear intentions, and often rely on historical contexts for the audience's understanding of social etiquettes to be successful. The commedia is street theatre, travelling region to region, for the enjoyment of village-folk and illiterates, some who may speak the languages of the actor and some who may not. "Low comedy" brings basic human experiences such as life and death, sex, insults, violence, vices, bodily function, and social rebellion into the (suggested) spotlight for the purpose of entertainment. The name "vulgar comedy" suggests this, and the practice has had a bad reputation for ever. The church banned theatre for a time, around 500 A.D., in part because Christian prophets and rituals were openly ridiculed on the stage while Christians were the non-majority group. During that time, theatre did not disappear, but surfaced in other varieties of entertainment such as these traveling troupes, acrobatics, juggling, and jesting. Commedia dell'arte was able to form and develop its own distinct flavour away from the sanctifying institutions of the church or state or social elites. Instead, it took on priorities of the people and for the people—satirists, rebels, and outcasts.

Commedia dell'arte in its earliest historical mentions begins around 1400 AD as travelling troupes of players who rely on improvisation for telling entertaining stories to small villages, towns, and cities, eventually also performing for noble courts in the 16th and 17th centuries. They performed in vernacular dialects, not in Latin, like the "Commedia Erudita", which was for the nobility and scholars of the time. Instead,

comedian dell'arte was universally accessible entertainment, more comprehensible to the general public. Stereotypes such as these are found in universal fictions, and even in narrative histories. This is because character archetypes permeate through psychological digestion of memories and individuals in the world— they can be found in ancient mythologies, religious stories, odysseys, film, literature, and of course the theatre. In the mystical practice of tarot card fortune telling, situational and character archetypes dress a number of randomly shuffled cards. The reader, or audience, puts meaning into these cards of generic advices, which makes them relevant to the individual, but the cards themselves hold no magic besides the phenomenon of shared experience or perhaps collective unconscious. The fool, for example, is the first card in most tarot decks. He is also the joker in playing cards, and Arlecchino in the commedia. He is one of the most common character types in storytelling, the figure we perhaps fear of being, or even identify with; or, on the other hand, he may represent another figure in our lives that we view as foolish or strange, that we might dislike or worry for the sake of. It is easy to spot fools, know-it-all scholars, overprotective fathers, arrogant braggarts, coy and coquette ladies, and others because they are grand character archetypes that we subconsciously categorise others into — this is the reason archetypes exist. “The mythology, consequently, remains fluid, as poetry; and the gods are not literally concretized, like Yahweh in the garden (of Eden), but are known to be just what they are: personifications brought into being by the human creative imagination,” (Joseph Campbell, *Oriental Mythology: The Masks of God*, pg. 31). Italo Calvino published an exercise in narrative storytelling based on random cards selected from tarot reading, proving that because of the easily applicable archetypes he is able to flawlessly navigate the creation of fictitious dilemmas and weave together story tropes at random to deliver a coherent message. We, the readers of cards and readers of stories, give meanings to the symbols we encounter. Symbols are insignificant without the weight of compounded human experience.

The Characters

Occasionally the actors would use scenarios of classical origin and mythologies, always a skeletal framework, and easily malleable. In both occidental and oriental tradition, mythologies are personifications brought into being by our creative imagination. Joseph Campbell points out, “however, in as much as they are known one by reflection in the mind, they partake of the faults of that medium— and this fact is perfectly well known to the Greek poets, as it is known to all the poets (though not, it would appear, to priests and prophets). The Greek tales of the gods are playful, humorous, at once presenting and dismissing the images; lest the mind, fixed upon them in awe, should fail to go past them to the ultimately unknown, only partially intuited, realities and reality that reflect,” (Joseph Campbell, *Oriental Mythology: The Masks of God*, pg. 31). Similarly to how the characters of the divine in mythology reflect humanity back at us, the ‘stock characters’ of commedia dell’arte performances were derived from exaggeration or parody of real-life ‘types’ of Italian people in the times of the performances. There is the character of **Pantalone**, a mask with a hooked nose and large eyebrows, painted black. The actor styles a pointed beard, and wears a red jacket and hose, with a cape, upturned slippers, and a Greek-style beret. He is usually a wealthy merchant who is protective of his daughter, an embodiment of the prosperous trade of Venice. Another character is said to be of Venice, the woman **Colombina**. She doesn’t wear a mask— the women tend not to, instead highlighting their beauty. She is a mischievous and twee maid, not always a character of virtue, often using her femininity to her advantage in an artful and sly manner. She is self-assured and coquette, but adventurous and faithfully the companion of the Arlecchino mask. Her cleverness is highlighted by his dim wit, and they are equally comic and brightly coloured. **Arlecchino**, a mask characterising Bergamo, is perhaps the most famous of the characters originating from the Commedia Dell’Arte tradition. He is clumsy, despite (or perhaps enhanced by) his acrobatic skills, always hungry, and exceedingly simple-minded. He is often duped by the playful tricks of others, and uses

simple but ridiculous props, for example: spatulas, for his gags. He is easy to spot in the troupe, because he wears the most colorful patchwork or diamond patterned suits. He also sports a white felt beret, and at times an animal tail. The mask itself is black, with devilish and feline features, which covers most of his face. His eyebrows are hairy, his nose is puggish, there is a bump on his head, a moustache, or any number of ridiculous features but always accompanied by a swaggering walk and acrobatic dancing. Another typical character representative of Bergamo is **Brighella**. He is an untrustworthy, meddlesome, tricky character who takes on roles such as the inn-keeper or servant, butler, or thief. In any case, he is usually troublesome and carries an instrument to showcase his musical talents. Brighella is recognised by an outfit of green and white stripes, a moustache, and a black or olive coloured mask. Brighella, Arlecchino, and Colombiano are three “zaini” characters, servants to the figures of the main story, and useful for gags and interludes. Zaini may not know much, but the mask characterising Bologna, Il **Dottore**, is well educated, conceited, and fat. He is called a “gourmet” for his love of the finer things, and often speaks in hyperbolic jargon to prove his intelligence, resulting in incomprehension of those he is speaking to on stage as well as the audience? He is recognised as a black mask with a bulbous nose, ridiculously placed warts, a doctor’s cap or large notary beret, and a huge black suit and white collar, sometimes wearing a ruff about his neck. He goes by other names, such as Balanzone, Balordo, or Graziano. The character with by far the most name variation, however, is Il **Capitano**. He is the character of the foreigner, often Spanish in Italian commedia, as a parody of an invader. He comes in many different costumes and many different names, sometimes multiple captaini exist in one sketch. In French engravings from 1621 by Jaques Callot, the “Balli di Sfessania”, we see drawings of many strange looking captains in different outfits poised to battle each other for the audience. The weapons are often cartoonish, such as being obviously made of wood, looking like a toy, swords with cobwebs on them or rust. He is all-talk, vain, demanding, and a braggart. Captain characters don’t always wear masks, but can differentiate themselves from others with decorated captain’s hat with feathers, flamboyant and brightly coloured military uniforms,

and sword sheaths. Despite examples of battling captain shows, the capitano never sheds blood. Although he may talk about his battle victories, he is unpracticed, inexperienced, and pompous. **Pulcinella** is a characterization of Naples, hunchbacked, clownish, and lazy. He is always seen in all white, sometimes with a neck ruff, and the mask itself would have a beaked nose and a huge mouth, because he is always hungry.

Commedia dell'arte characters are unique in that they were able to be understood as character archetypes throughout Europe and across language barriers because despite being based originally on Italian regional stereotypes. The types of masks and costume that these characters wear is very important because, while the actors may be playing the part on stage, the mask itself owns "who" the character is and what attitudes they represent.

Vagabond Theatre, Minimalist Theater

The settings of the practice of *commedia dell'arte* are simple, inventive, and build upon a one or two-line prompt by practiced improvisation acting. Delicate, archived handwritten books found at the *Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e del Turismo* in Rome, Italy, were likely written for playactors of the *commedia*. Pages within contain performance story synopses, stage direction, necessary props, and setting. These guides are skeletal frameworks with simple, small props and generic locations. Settings are along these lines: Forest, feasts, inns, taverns (*hostaria*), and city streets. Props are very simple objects that would be easy to travel with, such as torches, suitcases, hats and turbans, weapons such as rifles and daggers, seats, books, costume jewelry, fabrics, ladders, and candles.

Unfortunately, no artifacts of stage or prop have survived to the present day, but are visually depicted only through the paintings of the Bentvueghels and Bamboccianti groups of painters who traveled through Italy as a rite of passage for their craft. The following is a list of thirteen paintings in chronological order representing the *commedia dell'arte* at work, performing in public:

Flemish Painting, 1590, Hieronymus Francken the Elder, "I Gelosi":

A simple wood stage set with a dark curtain backdrop. Seven figures, two backstage and five performing characters. A caped man in a feathered hat, Columbina, Isabella, Pantalone, and a grey-costumed player. Pantalone interacts, seems to be addressing, the elegantly dressed Isabella.

Flemish Painting, 1640, Bamboccianti artist Jan Miel, "Actors from the *Commedia dell'Arte* on a Wagon in a Town Square"

A simple wooden stage built onto a cart with tall wheels. It is pulled by oxen and can fit many people on the surface. Five masked characters, a Pantalone, Brighella

playing the lute, Capitano, and Isabella sit on the stage as it is travelling through town, while Pulcinella, Arlecchino, and another masked character dressed in black are on foot with the townspeople.

1645, Jan Miel, "Carnival in the Piazza Colonna Rome"

A wooden cart pulled by oxen is within a heavily populated Piazza. There are many "Arlecchino" figures on foot having some kind of playful fighting interaction. Many masked persons, including children. There is a large group standing or sitting on the wagon stage. One performer is strung floating up high above the crowd attached to a pulley in the background.

1650, Jan Miel, "Charlatan"

A simple wooden stage outside the walls of a small town. There are three figures standing above a crowd that reaches only to the actors' feet. There is a poster serving as a backdrop and advertisement for the show. A black masked character plays a stringed instrument, and one may be a Capitano. The other is dressed simply and addresses the audience. A man is sharpening a tool beside the stage.

1653, Jan Miel, "Carnaval Prado"

Eight figures stand on an oxen-drawn wagon stage. The wheels are nearly as tall as the oxen, and a green cloth is sat upon the flat wood stage, which logically serves doubly as a dark backdrop. The players all wear distinct hat silhouettes and have shiny ceramic, as if made of a material glazed or varnished. It appears that they all are masked excepting the character who appears to be Capitano. One moustachioed man also sporting a top-hat and feather may be the Oste, an Inn-Keeper character, wearing peasant clothing, with apron and voluminous sleeves. Next to him is a character in a black feathered cap and a black suit coat embroidered in gold. There is one woman on stage in a mask who may be the character Columbina. Three Arlecchino figures in red, blue, and yellow roughhouse on the street beside the wagon. One character who may be

Dottorre is on horse or donkeyback in a large flat black hat, reads from a thick book. Behind him, also on a donkey, is Pulcinella wearing a stuffed “fat” shirt with sleeves that are comically long.

Italian Painting, ~1630-1640, “Bamboccianti” artist Michelangelo Cerquozzi, “The Rehearsal, or A Scene from the Commedia dell’Arte”

This painting features an indoor stage scene. The stage is low to the ground with a simple cloth background strung up. On the floor beneath the actors is an elegant rug or cloth with a pattern. A table in the background has an unworn costume strewn about it. The far left of the painting feature Pulcinella in a stuffed white shirt and a mask with a hooked nose, and a masked actor in long black robes and a wide black hat. An unmasked actor near the back of the stage reads from a piece of paper, and in front of him an unmasked man (Brighella) and woman (Columbina) study another paper which may be a very loose script or intended sequence. Another woman (Isabella) tunes a lute to their left, and to their right a masked actor wearing a long nose carries a guitar onto the stage. Capitano in the back of them speaks with masked Pantalone, who points to some indiscernible images or text on the wall. On the far left of the painting there are three more costumed figures, one in all black, Arlecchino, and another masked character painted with red rosy cheeks and a white neck ruff.

Dutch Painting, 1657, “Bentvueghel” and “Bamboccianti” artist Karel Dujardin, nicknamed Barca di Becco, Bokkebaart, or Goat-Beard, “Les Charlatans Italiens”

A simple stage set build in the outside perimeter of a town. In the background landscape there are ruins of a section of old city. On stage, there is a simple cloth backdrop and a poster with a painting of an actor red costume. Small notes are attached to the bottom, which may be set directions, lines, or something like a monologue. A masked actor peers out from behind the curtain as an unmasked, or perhaps simply-masked character in all black with a sword hunches over and starts on tiptoe. An open chest of props can be seen on stage right. In the front, an actor dressed in white

with a black mask plays guitar for a small peasant audience. On the left, a decorated horse or donkey with headdress stands behind the viewers. It may be owned and used by the actors as an advertisement for the travelling show.

[Flemish Painting, ~1630-1720, Peter van Bredael, "Commedia dell'Arte Scene"](#)

Across the river from a town, in front of a scene of ruins, a large crowd of mostly peasants but also some finely dressed men encircle a simple wooden stage with a curtain-walled backstage. A white paper, perhaps a small script, and chest of props on a small wooden table is on stage behind two performers. One in is white (Pulcinella) and another dances in a dark outfit and red cap while holding a mask with devilish horns. A third actor peeks over the backdrop cloth facing the audience.

[French Painting, ~1710-1720, Jean Antoine Watteau, "The Italian Comedy"](#)

A night scene of performers making music, standing on the ground. In the foreground lit by a character holding a torch candle (Brighella), we see an actor in all black, an actress in elegant clothing, a young actor holding his black mask in front of him, unmasked Pulcinella playing guitar, Arlecchino, an old man leaning on a cane, and a few other indistinguishable players.

[German Painting, ~1700s, Unknown "Bamboccianti" artist, "Karnevalstreiben"](#)

A covered wagon pulled by horses moves through a dancing crowd. The man at the reigns wears a mask, as do the dancers in the street. There is a clear Capitano with a sword and a Colombina character playing tambourine, a black masked figure in a black outfit with gold embroidery playing lute, and a handful of other colourful characters in masks.

[~1700s, Unknown Bamboccianti artist, "Theateraufführung"](#)

On a tall simple wooden stage outside of a town, three actors perform to a small crowd. One in long black robes, a large hat, and thick book (Dottore), another in a red

cap, and the third dressed elegantly (perhaps Capitano) and holding a scroll open for the audience to view. A player peeks at the action from backstage. In front of the simple backdrop wall made of cloth is a poster of a painted man who looks like the character holding the scroll open onstage. Beneath that is a small table holding a chest of props, some objects, and a skull.

French Painting, 1760, Gabriel Jacques de Saint-Aubin, "A Street Show in Paris (La Parade du Boulevard)"

A simple wooden stage with a fence seen from the audience perspective within the city. People view two captains fighting in front of a tall simple backdrop cloth. Some viewers lean out of the windows of their homes. The duel is part of the acrobatics of the commedia dell'arte talents. The sword fighting for sport is used as entertainment on the stage.

Spanish Painting, 1793, Francisco Goya, "The Strolling Players"

A simple stage with a colourful rug laid down and white backdrop curtain leading to backstage. From there a Suggestore— typical Italian figure who commentates on the show— may tell the actor what to say in a moment of amnesia. Arlecchino balances goblets filled with liquids on his hands and head, a red-capped clown figure puts his arm around an actress in the role of Isabella. A regally dressed character in a powdered wig holds a paper, and in front of him a Capitano-costumed player who appears to be a dwarf in stature raises a bottle and glass. An audience gazes up at them from below the stage, which reaches up to chin level.

Comedy Everlasting

Commedia dell'arte is called a lost art, its mood and style irrecoverable. However true that may be, commedia dell'arte was simply improvisational storytelling with minimal set pieces or props, which is still a vibrant and alive in the modern age. In what remains of the commedia tradition today, we look to Franca Rame and Dario Fo. These two are a famous married Italian couple who embodied this tradition of entertainment using little to no stage set, vibrant costume, masks, and a style of speaking in gibberish vowel sounds and onomonopeda to simply and effectively communicate mood and subject to an audience without having to consider language as a barrier. This “Gammelot” technique just described is also useful to be intuitive in improvisation without being held back by the constraint of language. Historical accounts of commedia describe the actors speaking in non-words, so it is likely that the practice of Dario Fo and Franca Rame, he who came from a small remote Italian village with a living tradition of oral storytelling and acting and she who came from a family troupe of travelling performers, is rooted deeply in historical tradition. Similarly to what we know about the topics of ridicule in the old commedia, Rame and Fo were politically critical, and not shy about expressing their views. Rame in particular was targeted and affected by backlash from the political state they criticised, suffering abuse because of her role as an actress against the political corruption and hypocrisy, similar to the jests made against the Christians rising to power of the old commedia, and the banning of the theatre by the church in attempt to control the rebels. At an exhibit in Rome at the Palazzo Barberini of their life work, there are colourful costumes on display, playbills and artwork depicting simple stage sets and characters by the artist, and objects of importance for running the show such as a skeletal script that only gives a simple outline of plot or premeditation on the performance. Improvisation by nature is deeply rooted in human psychology. Classical mythologies and simple or well known tales were skeletal frameworks for the skits which playactors would put on for common audiences. The practice is equated to “low” and

“vulgar” comedic styles. This is because the jokes that are foundational to the entertainment are rooted in the lowest common denominator of human shared experience. And so topics such as juvenile potty humour, sex, moral vices, social rebellion, and the misfortune of others were prevalent in the actions and dialogue of the actors. These topics, even if lewd, are relatable to all people regardless of class, language, or national identity. These traveling troupes began more often playing for small towns and villages, but as its popularity grew, royals and elites would hire the comedians to play for them. While some would, and still do, cast shame on the hilarity of common bodily and social functions, this doesn’t necessarily deter the “elite” from enjoyment and understanding. The primitive desires and impulses within human minds are fairly universal, with few deviations, affecting our subconscious waking thoughts, dreams, storywriting, and improvised acting. “Creative writers of genius had fragmentary insight into mental processes, but no systematic method of investigation before Freud,” writes the editor Angela Richards in 1977, prefacing a collection of Freud’s case histories. Creative writers indeed reveal much about the human understanding of the mind and dream, innately. Similarities between global mythologies illustrate how similar human minds tend to respond to events. Freud’s work can be and have been applied not only to psychoses, but also “normal processes as slips of the tongue, making jokes, artistic creation, political institutions, and religions,” (Sigmund Freud: His Life and Ideas, pg. 20) and certainly to ancient and orally transcribed folktales and mythologies meant to impart some kind of moral lesson or warning. The irrational subconscious also works to explain the human tendency to stereotype others around us into character ‘types’ and stock personalities— how some shared traits between two unique figures in our lives can lead us to place two in a shared category of physical or nonphysical characteristics. Mentally we create these ‘stock characters’ like the commedia masks who exist in our personal worldviews, and unsurprisingly, many types of our own invention are greatly similar to those stereotypes created by others. Furthermore, it is also the case that many stereotypes are empirically learned from our surrounding communities and the prejudices which were pre-existing to our birth into the world.

Commedia dell'arte isn't so old that it's dead. Its impact has been far reaching and potent. Many have tried to recover its distinct quality with mixed amounts of success, but what lives on of the commedia is as lasting as the human race itself. Internal thoughts, prejudices, emotions, and criticisms of the world around us are pulled out by the improvisational theatre. What is revealed on the stage is a reflection of the world around us, what the audience gleans from the performance is more of a reflection of their views and desires than that of the actor. It is the mask itself that embodies the old but still relevant stereotypes of men and women, a portal into the subconscious that the actor embodies and animates. All fictions, including religious stories and fortune telling, uncover the deepest levels of primitive hopes, fears, regrets, and sexual desires in the subconscious self. Stories and mythology are built on foundational archetypes and common cycles of birth, life, and death. The Commedia Dell'Arte isn't foundationally different than our other methods of storytelling, it was one stepping stone on the footpath in the evolution of entertainment and narrative tales. Today we have film, radio, interactive media, and still the theatre exists— and on all of these platforms we see references back to the strength of human expression which commedia dell'arte was the height of. As long as people are alive and expressing themselves through story, the commedia dell'arte will be living as well.

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