

Commedia dell'Arte

Teachers' Notes

Performer

Dennis Murphy is a master puppeteer who has a passion for *Commedia dell'Arte* in both its mask and puppet forms. He has studied the subject extensively and has performed at festivals in Australia and Europe. In 1996 his *Commedia* puppetry earned him the "Ural Citation for Excellence" in Russia. In 1998 Dennis represented Australia at the International Children's Festival in Italy.

Commedia dell'Arte

Commedia dell'Arte was a lively and highly successful form of Italian mask theatre originating in the 15th or 16th century. It probably evolved from the variety acts presented to attract crowds to the charlatans selling patent medicines in the market squares. For over 200 years it was the most popular form of entertainment in all of Europe as far afield as England and Russia.

It's hard to be precise when it comes to the history of *Commedia dell'Arte*. 'Serious' scholars of the time dismissed it as a vulgarity enjoyed only by the baser elements of society.

The artists themselves rarely wrote anything down. They preferred to just DO IT. They were also ever mindful of competitors so any notebooks they kept were usually written in a personal code or were so abbreviated as to be incomprehensible to anyone but the writer.

Much of what we know about *Commedia dell'Arte* comes from non-Italian sources; eg from the diaries of travellers like the German poet Goethe. Paintings and sketches from the time have also helped.

RESOURCES: There are several good books on *Commedia dell'Arte* but most are out of print. Two very good books readily available are:

COMMEDIA dell'ARTE, an Actor's Handbook, by John Rudlin. Routledge. London 1994

THE TRICKS OF THE TRADE by Dario Fo. Methuen Drama, London 1991

DARK SIDE MASKS provide professionally designed *Commedia* workshop masks in latex. Contact Ross Brown on (049) 571 671

Commedia dell'Arte was based on

1. Stock Characters
2. Improvisation
3. Strong rapport with the audience

1. STOCK CHARACTERS: Though many different troupes travelled around presenting shows, the same characters kept popping up on stage. These were the archetypes that go way back in history; the stingy Old Man, the Pedant, the Braggart. Their popularity with the public ensured their survival from the earliest times.

The public came to know and love the characters and to anticipate certain behaviour from them. There were hundreds of characters presented over the centuries. The more popular ones stayed on as stock characters, the others died when their creators died.

The characters themselves changed over the years. As society changed and became more sensitive so too did the characters. The actors had to keep their portrayals in tune with the expectations of their paying audience.

Historical factors were also reflected in the plays. When lawlessness was endemic in Italy, brigands and kidnappings became an important part of the show. When the Ottoman Empire threatened Venetian trade, Turks were the villains of the piece. Authority figures, the butt of many jokes, changed with regions and time.

Because of this constant evolution it is impossible to talk about "The True Arlecchino." Usually what is meant by this statement is "My Favourite Arlecchino."

2. IMPROVISATION: *Commedia dell'Arte* was not scripted. The actors improvised, playing off each other to present a show of 1 to 3 hours' length. They worked around a basic outline known as a scenario; simply a piece of paper pinned up backstage that reminded the actors what acts they were in and what had to be done in each act.

This was an actor's theatre, not a playwright's. The actors carried off the production by the sheer weight of their on-stage skills. This is not to say that it was entirely invented on the spot. The actors specialised in the characters they played and so built up a repertoire of speeches and actions relevant to their character. While they may have cribbed some poetry or jokes here and there to use on stage, most of their material they developed themselves. It might have been a bit of 'business' that they thought up or just something that happened during a performance. If it worked it was kept and polished to be used again and again in future shows.

3. STRONG RAPPORT WITH THE AUDIENCE: *Commedia dell'Arte* was street theatre. For most of their careers the actors were busking. They had to know their audience and be constantly aware of its mood. If they lost their audience they lost income. If the energy of the performance slackened, they knew they had to liven things up. They had to be aware too of anything else that was going on in the square that might attract the audience away. They knew how to play to the audience they had, often 'reading' an audience through the backdrop and watching people arrive. This rapport meant they could adapt to different conditions and perform to any audience; be it a crowd in the street or a party of aristocrats in the local baronial hall.

INFLUENCES ON THEATRE: *Commedia* played an important role in the history of Theatre and Comedy. It influenced playwrights like Carlo Goldoni in Italy, Lope de Vega in Spain and Moliere in France.

CHARACTER COMEDY is still very popular today as evidenced by high-rating TV sitcoms like *The Simpsons*, *Seinfeld* and *The Nanny*. The latter is a good example of the master-servant relationships that got lots of laughs. It was often hard to tell who was the boss and who was the servant.

THE DUO COMEDY TEAM or First Clown-Second Clown was another routine that never lost its appeal. Two fools together with one slightly less foolish than the other, (being 'the smart one' or first clown). Look at the films of 'Laurel & Hardy' and 'Abbott & Costello.' Current examples include a lot of the comedy of 'Hale & Pace' and 'French & Saunders.'

GRAMMELOT or Grummellot was a form of gibberish based on the rhythms and lilts of a particular language or dialect. It may have sounded like French but it was unintelligible to the French. This skill helped the players when they performed in foreign countries or when they were forbidden by law to use dialogue onstage.

REGIONAL HUMOUR or making fun of people's place of origin was a large part of *Commedia* humour. Each character was associated with a particular city, region or country. They spoke with a regional accent and usually epitomised the stereo-types of that area. American cartoons often have the slow, stupid character speaking with the American Southern Accent. Look at *Forrest Gump*.

COMIC SERVANTS: These characters used their 'lazzi' or comic business to keep the audiences interested in the show to its end; the time for collecting money. Their job was comic relief. They often tricked their masters and the master/servant relationship was a great source of comedy for them. These characters often appeared to be quite stupid. Sometimes they were but it's probably better to think of them as stubborn. Stubborn as nature itself. They will not take the imprint of civilisation. They mindlessly resist everything but the impulse to be themselves. Pantalone harangues Arlecchino to get him to change his behaviour but it has only a temporary effect.

***Commedia dell'Arte* PUPPETRY:** All the time that the actors were presenting *Commedia dell'Arte* in mask on stage, the puppeteers were in their booths using the same characters as puppets. The puppets retained their masks and personalities but the puppetry humour was much more localised as the puppeteers did not have to tour. The shows were presented in the local dialect. A large city could support several one-man shows (until recently it was a man not a woman).

The puppet show was the product of the individual puppeteer's sense of humour (as opposed to the more generalised mask humour which was the result of working ensemble). The puppet humour tended to be much more satirical.

"He [the puppeteer] excused nobody, neither the prelates, nor the cardinal, nor the Pope; and he placed his show boldly underneath the windows of those whom he had picked as the targets of his satires." (Constantino Maes, *Curiosita romane*, 1885)

When *Commedia* lost its appeal touring mask companies of ten to twelve actors became uneconomic and died out. The puppet shows, being more economic, lived on and are still to be seen in Italy. Many puppeteers introduced unmasked non-*Commedia* local heroes as side-kicks to the local hero.

Pulcinella, the mask character associated with the City of Naples, was taken to France where he became "Polichinelle". Later a French puppeteer took him to England where he became "Punchinello" and eventually "Mr

Punch of the Punch and Judy shows. This puppet 'hero' spread all over Europe taking up citizenship under different names in many countries. In Russia, for example, this character became 'Petrushka' and is still performed today as far east as Siberia.

He is always recognizable as the basic trickster and cynic who flaunts convention and ridicules law and authority. These anti-social traits come from his medieval origins. At carnivals and May fairs, he represented the New Year come to overthrow the Old Year. The Old Year or Old Man lives on in characters such as Dottore and Pantalone, the authority figures of the Commedia dell' Arte.

RESOURCE: For a good history of Italian Puppetry see "Punch in the Italian Puppet Theatre" by Michael Byrom, Centaur Press, 1983.

CHARACTER EXERCISES

DOTTORE: Costume : all black. Image: goose. [high status] "Pompous Windbag and know-it-all". Tilt head up to show wide-open eyes. Lean back from hips. Slow, ponderous speech. Hand gestures get away on him and he has a 'revolt of the hands' on his hands but otherwise he stands still. Hands slap and fight each other while he pontificates. Follow action of hands with the nose, head bent down.

Pontificating Exercise: Gaze into Air - head right back. Waddling walk, head back. Upper body stiff while walking. Finger pointing skyward and wagging to emphasise his rhetoric. Stop, look at finger, slap, continue walk. Use really big words, real or invented.

PANTALONE: Costume: black with red lining. Image: chicken or vulture. [high status] "Old and obsessive about money"

Very stooped walk with knees well-bent to reduce his height. Tilted head suggests curiosity. Sadness shown with frown, mouth open, head tilted up or sideways turn. Stroke beard. Gnarled hands one above the other clutching large money bag (full of coins) as he proclaims his pathetic poverty. Point with head.

Begging Exercise: "Perhaps you could LEND me some money?" One hand juts out and wiggles grasping fingers as other hand throws cape open suddenly (he's a vulture approaching prey). Close in slowly on your target. When potential creditor refuses to lend you money turn with head down in disappointment, pigeon-walk laterally, raise head and spot another potential creditor. Point with head.

Anger exercise: When money is refused him, Pantalone explodes with anger revealing his red lining. He always has sudden, spectacular changes of mood.

CAPTAIN: Costume: military with cloak. Image: stallion (or show pony?) [high status]

Hold chest out proudly. Look up. Arms up. Lower teeth showing. Head down suggests focused or angry and threatening. Sudden loss of status when afraid; pose shrinks to cowering and shaking with fear.

Entrance exercise: Arrive with horse prance then POSE. Throw cape off one shoulder, with swagger of head. Then off other shoulder. Fumbling with cape while trying to maintain your exaggerated dignity. Wait for applause then drop head over chest in disappointment. Cover embarrassment by shouting for silence. Paw the ground as you stand there to be admired.

ARLECCHINO: Costume : a mass of patches, later lozenges-patterned. Image: monkey or cat. [low status] "Happy-go-lucky but hungry"

Light on feet, weight on one foot, other foot has heel only resting on ground - as if always ready to spring off. Constant movement with head still at times while body moves or body still as only head moves. Lots of hand poses; palms up (openess). Lateral shifts of head only. Head back, mouth open. Tongue showing. Eyes looking side to side.

Belly dance exercise: Announce with great delight that you are going to do a wonderful belly dance. Show left face with scarf as veil over mouth moving eyes from side to side. Entice audience with scarf.

"What is the purpose of the mask? To magnify and simultaneously give the essence of the character. It obliges you to widen and develop your gestures."

- Dario Fo

EXAGGERATE ! EXAGGERATE!! EXXAGGGGERRRATTE!!!!

NOTES ON MASK PERFORMANCE

BODY LANGUAGE; In Mask performance it is important to remember that the mask is cutting off much of your facial expressions. You will need to use more 'body language' to communicate with your audience.

NOT YOU, A CHARACTER; Remember that when you put on a mask you become a 'character'. this is a great freeing-up concept. It's not YOU making a fool of yourself in front of everyone; it's the character doing it. That's

now clowns get away with throwing pies in people's faces and now court jesters could insult the king and not get beheaded. So go for it.

DRINKING IT IN; Remember that the power of Mask is often in its stillness. Too much movement can detract from your performance. The audience needs time to 'drink in' your character, especially when you first appear. Use stillness and posing to give them that chance. Think of the mask show, not as a video, but as slide show; a series of poses with movement in between.

SHOW US; You're wearing a mask so make sure your audience can see it. Don't turn too far away from the audience's view. If you must turn away, consider the use of wigs and/or hats to hide the mask's elastic band. Try at all times to at least show the 'half mask', that is, make sure the audience can see one eye and the nose.

NO TOUCHING; When in mask, try not to touch it with your hand. When you do, the audience immediately thinks, "Oh, that mask must be uncomfortable". We don't want to call their attention to the fact that you're just someone wearing a mask. We want them to go along with your being a Mask character.

THE MIND'S VIDEO CAMERA; Think of your audience as each having a video camera in their minds. They will come in for a close-up when you work in a small way (fumbling while trying to open an envelope) and they will pull back for a wide shot when you step out, crossing the stage.

CONTROL THE SHOTS; Using this video camera idea, work out a good variety of shots. Know when you want a close-up and when you want a wide shot. You can learn to control your audience's attention. Want to call attention to some tiny movement of a finger? Make sure that you make no other movement bar that finger. Any other movement going on will cause the audience to miss it.

EXERCISES FOR CHARACTER WORK

Portray a character that is older than you or younger than you. You are in a supermarket, returning some faulty goods. Find the manager and make a complaint.

Choose an animal and portray it. Show it waking up in the morning. Show it eating. Show two different animals meeting for the first time.

Portray a member of the opposite sex walking. Note how different the walk is from your usual walk.

Choose one of the Commedia characters and portray him. Explore how a female in character differs from the traditional male role.

Young Australia Workshop

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