

# Puppets & Masks of Italy - Teachers Notes

This show is for use in primary Italian Studies. While the performance is in English, it touches on Italian history, dialect, regional characters and specialised vocabulary.

The show focuses on the *Commedia dell' Arte* tradition of Italy, both in Mask and in Puppetry. The history of Commedia naturally involves Italian history, particularly in discussing the satire so prevalent in the Puppet booth.

The Commedia characters themselves reflect their regional origins. Each character was closely associated with his native city and was portrayed with the characteristics attributed to that city. For example, *IL Dottore* comes from the University City of Bologna. As a result he is always portrayed as a pedant. Old *Pantalone* comes from the great city, Venice and so is portrayed as an astute businessman.

The working conditions of a traveling mask troupe and of 'resident' puppeteers are discussed. The Commedia operated as an entertainment in the piazza as well as in the palazzi of the aristocracy. The different audiences and economic circumstances eventually affected the performance and the evolution of Commedia.

The reforms of playwright Carlo Goldoni and the plays of Carlo Gozzi are mentioned in looking at the influence Commedia has had on Theatre (Moliere and Shakespeare) and on comedy in general.

Examples are given of Commedia-type comic devices to be found in current television shows. These include character comedy and 'first and second' clowns.

While no attempt is made to teach Italian vocabulary in the show, the following terms are touched on:

- BARACCA- glove puppet booth
- BURATTINI- glove puppet, named for the buratto, or rough material used for the sleeve.
- CONCERTATORE- the business manager
- CONCETTI- set speeches
- INNAMORATI- the lovers
- LAZZO- a piece of comic business
- SCENARIO- the outline of a play
- ZANNI- the clowns from which we have the word 'zany'
- ZIBALDONE- a notebook carried by the performer in which he wrote his speeches, poems and lazzi.

*"In my Commedia del' Arte work I have tried to maintain the flavour of those lively shows. I use a scenario pinned up backstage as was the tradition. While my characters speak English instead of Italian dialects, I have tried to give them appropriate accents to stimulate the status and class distinctions of the original shows."*

- Dennis Murphy

Puppets and Masks were used in both Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome but it was in Italy that they continued appearing for hundreds of years making Italy the centre of European Mask and Puppetry. Puppet characters identified in 15<sup>th</sup> century documents can still be seen in street performances today,

*COMMEDIA dell' ARTE* or 'Comedy of Skills' originated among the mountebanks who used acrobats and jugglers to attract customers. By the 16<sup>th</sup> century it had been developed into improvised comedy using stock characters called Masks (*le maschere*). Travelling troupes of actors would set up a raised stage in the piazza and improvising from a simple outline (*scenario*), they presented comedies that used acrobatics, set speeches, comic 'business' (*lazzi*), music and poetry. The story often revolved around two lovers (*innamorati*) who were being prevented from marrying. The comic servants (*zanni*) added humor with their antics. Our word 'zany' comes from the Italian *zanni*. The same stock characters were also appearing in the puppet booths (*le baracche*).

Italy is the cradle of European puppetry so it is not surprising that in Italian you have to be specific as to the type of puppetry you are talking about. There are several categories.

*Burattini*, refers to the mostly traditional glove puppets, named for the *buratto* or coarse cloth used to make the hardwearing sleeves of the puppet.

*Marionette* are string puppets.

*Pupi* are those puppets we generally call Sicilian rod puppets though this style is not restricted to Sicily. A strong rod comes up out of the head of the puppet and is controlled from above by puppeteers on an 'bridge' or standing behind the

fight and decapitations. Performances are presented every evening for months. To go through the full cycle takes up to six months.

*Pupazzi* is the catch-all category that includes all those types of puppets not already referred to. These would be the non-traditional rods, arm, Muppet-style, etc.

In PUPPETS AND MASKS OF ITALY we meet some of the traditional Commedia dell' Arte characters and learn about the performances they did in Italy. We see Arlecchino and Pantalone first as Mask characters. Later we see them again as puppets (burattini) and also meet IL Capitano, Brighella, IL Dottore and others.

The characters are explained and demonstrated so that the children can get an idea of what performances were like. In the fast-paced puppetry segment, there is lots of audience participation as Arlecchino has to go through the magic forest to visit 'Streganonna'. The show leaves lots of scope for follow-up vocabulary teaching.

#### PUPPET CHARACTERS OF THE COMMEDIA DELL' ARTE TRADITION

The Commedia dell' Arte spawned a great number of characters in mask and puppetry. There are good arguments on both sides as to which came first, The Mask or the Puppet. No one really knows.

The Commedia-based Puppetry encompassed both the glove puppet booth and the marionette theatre. The marionettes followed the more elegant aspects of Commedia; particularly dance and love poetry. Marionettes had the grace and movement for it.

The mask shows were 'group-devised'. The mask actors worked from a plot outline while marionette shows tended to be scripted. The glove puppet show was a one-man (not a one-person) show and as a result the nature of the shows were determined by the puppeteer alone, guided by local Tradition. Censorship, when it existed could only work with the marionettes as the mask and glove puppet shows were improvised.

While the mask companies had to keep on the move to earn a living for their 10 or 12 actors, the solo puppeteer did not have to tour to support himself. As a result, he stayed in one place and his humor and satire were very localised. The cop on the beat may rate a barbed mention, an erring local priest was named. The German poet, Goethe, referred to a Pulcinella show as "a sort of living newspaper", full of the hottest gossip and local news.

With the creative control resting with the puppeteer, it is not surprising that changes came about. The puppeteer chose which characters to portray and though they followed the Tradition, the characters did slowly change over the centuries. Some characters were already regional, rather than descended from Commedia. Others were introduced as the 'local hero'. The parochial nature of the shows meant that they were performed in dialect and to this day the shows can be considered one of the lively forms of Italian dialect theatre.

Fairy-tale elements eventually came into the Puppetry, probably as a result of the success of Carlo Gozzi's fairy-tales and plays. Devils, witches, and magic potions appeared. A dog arm-puppet began fighting Pulcinella. Princesses got kidnapped left, right and centre.

I have also had to adopt my shows for Australian conditions while still, I hope, keeping the spirit of *Commedia dell' Arte*. In the old days the shows were aimed solely at the adults (who were the ones with money) and the children were ignored. My shows aim at both. For example, I try to increase the action of the characters to hold children's attention. But there are still references that the children won't understand- but the teachers will.

I work from a scenario pinned up backstage, as was the Italian tradition. While my characters speak English instead of Italian dialects, I have tried to give them appropriate accents to simulate the status and class distinctions of the original shows.

Dennis Murphy

#### The Characters of Commedia dell' Arte

ARLECCINO (or Harlequin) comes from the northern Italian town of Bergamo. He was traditionally cast as a servant who delighted in confounding his master. He is in love with Columbina and he is always hungry as his master doesn't feed him. Despite everything he is a cheerful, happy-go-lucky clown. His character and movements were associated with those of a monkey.

Vocabulary words: *furbo, avere fame, l'amore, servo, scherzo, scimmia.*

OLD PANTALONE was a satire on the greedy Venetian merchant. At the time of the Commedia Venice was a powerful City-State with the largest European empire since Roman times. It traded with the Middle East, India and China. Marco Polo was a Venetian. Pantalone was usually portrayed