

Commedia Tonight

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By Jean Schiffman



Chances are you won't be cast in a historically accurate commedia dell'arte play any time this century. But learning the physical skills, improv techniques, ensemble structure, mask work, and character types used in commedia can be fun, challenging, and – in this era of stylistically hybrid productions – a useful tool in your continually enlarging tool chest.

Graduates of the Dell'Arte International School of Physical Theatre in rural Blue Lake, Calif. (www.dellarte.com), which was founded by the late Carlo Mazzone-Clementi, are often scooped up for Cirque du Soleil clown roles and are well equipped for dance-theatre productions. One student of New York City's Roving Classical Commedia University (www.commediau.com) – which calls itself "totally unaccredited" – polished up her skills as the commedia stock character Il Dottore (the Doctor) and parlayed that into a gig as an opening act at medical conferences. Actor and mask maker Stanley Allan Sherman, a founder of Commedia U. with master juggler Hovey Burgess, says his commedia training has been helpful in commercial auditions, enabling him to open himself up to reacting to and having fun with his co-actors and the material. "If you're not having fun, they're definitely not," Sherman says of those watching.

When commedia dell'arte originated, around the 15th century in Italy, it was an unscripted form of theatre. Throughout their careers, actors generally played only a few of a group of stock characters, making those characters ever richer and deeper. Following short "scenarios" that laid out subject, characters, relationships, and circumstances, the actors improvised hours-long plays. "They thought it was horrid to go to the theatre and do the same thing every night," Sherman observes. Thus, improvisation and ensemble work became essential elements of commedia. It wasn't until the 18th century that Carlo Goldoni revived it in written form.

Masks became part of the tradition, worn by recurring characters such as the elderly leech Pantalone, the pompous Il Dottore, and the brash Il Capitano. Juggling, music, stunts, poetry, and other skills also became part of the pantheon. English, French, and Italian playwrights – including Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Molière, Beaumarchais, Marivaux, Carlo Gozzi, and the aforementioned Goldoni – were influenced by the form. So were "silent film, vaudeville, burlesque, jazz, and the American musical theatre," according to Dell'Arte International School founding member Joan Schirle in her article "Movement Training: Dell'Arte International" in the book *Movement for Actors* (edited by Nicole Potter). That's not to mention the stock characters you see on TV sitcoms today – the bumbling fool, such as Seinfeld's Kramer, and so forth. Dell'Arte founding member Michael Fields, who like Schirle is a disciple of Mazzone-Clementi, points out other modern equivalents of commedia archetypes: The pedantic Il Dottore is like today's long-winded politicians, while Hugh Hefner is a Pantalone, desperately trying to remain young.

"These classic character types still apply today," agrees Burgess, who with Sherman teaches commedia as it was performed in the 16th and 17th centuries. Sherman studied with the famed French physical theatre master Jacques Lecoq, and he and Burgess worked with Mazzone-Clementi. "We don't think it's a problem to convert commedia to modern times," Burgess adds. "The situations in commedia are like situations today. When cheese smells bad, it can still make you barf. Girls still get pregnant out of wedlock." And according to Joan Holden, former primary writer for the commedia-style, politically satirical collective the San Francisco Mime Troupe,

"The characters are bottomless. They're elastic, multifaceted. You can stretch them a long way." When she first saw commedia around 1960, directed by Mime Troupe founder R.G. Davis and performed by Ruth Maleczech and others, Holden says, she'd never seen so much vibrant life on stage.

Roots of Riotousness

The roots of commedia are ancient. The Greek dramatist Menander (c. 342-291 B.C.) was the first to write stereotypical comic characters, which were greatly imitated by other writers. During the Renaissance, there was a craze for writing comedies, Burgess says. Over the centuries, writers continued to put their own spin on the characters, enriching them. Some also appear in Eastern theatrical forms, such as the master and servant types seen in Japanese kyogen.

Commedia characters, Holden says, are id-driven: "You know what they want. Their desires are very, very strong. Actors find that certain characters feel more natural to them than others." She sees herself as a Dottore type — the character who, as Sherman says, "can talk endlessly about any subject and make no sense whatsoever. God forbid if he ever tries to cure you of anything." What character would President Bush be? "A Capitano — the lying, braggart soldier, the tough guy," says Holden promptly.

So how does commedia relate to the modern actor? "There are so many different levels," Sherman says. "Rhythm exercises are extremely important. Object manipulation — knowing how to discover and play with an object, your relationship with it.... The deficits and assets of each all become assets." A speech impediment, for example, can also be turned into a comic attribute.

"A great deal of self-knowledge has to be employed," observes Fields, who often plays Pantalone and the mean servant Brighella in the school's Dell'Arte Company productions. "You have to know what your skills are and are not. Not everybody can play Lear. The vocal chops shouldn't be underestimated either. It's why students go crazy trying to approach the form — because it asks everything all at once."

Unlike Commedia U., the Dell'Arte International School does not promote the use of commedia in classic form. "Carlo [Mazzone-Clementi] always said, 'Commedia is dead; long live commedia,'" says Fields. "[But] as a form it's invaluable to study." As Schirle writes, the school teaches commedia because "it is an ensemble form...[and] provides the actor with the ability to play with physical characterization in situation and circumstance."

Fields elaborates that it can teach actors how to play strong intentions and how to work without a fourth wall. It's different from improv in that the characters have depth, he says, adding that a physical awareness is required — of your place in the space, of exits and entrances — that goes beyond the requirements of improv.

Commedia is not all about gags, of course. "There's a real human comedy in it," Fields says. "Arlecchino [the comic servant] is starving to death; the comedy comes out of his desperation in trying to solve his problem rather than showing us the problem."

"The mistake often is that [actors] think the essence of commedia is physical gestures and mask," says Holden, "whereas the essence is the characters. Very often the approach is very superficial. But the surface [of the characters] doesn't need to be imposed; the essence is there."

Fields points out other traps for actors. One is using energy to compensate for intention, so "you get this highly frenetic performance that becomes difficult to watch. Commedia is based in rhythm, but it shifts and changes and morphs, like jazz." Also, a mask isn't just a thing covering your face. "It implies an understanding of the body beneath the mask," he says. "Seeing through the mask means really discovering, seeing objects and reacting to them. A lot of times actors predict, figure out, plan — but to really see is something else." Commedia demands

great attention and presence on stage, never being ahead of or behind the beat, and always connecting with your co-actors.

What are the hardest things for actors to learn about commedia? Turns out they're remarkably similar to the challenges of modern acting styles. "The simplest, most fundamental thing: playing an intention fully," Fields says. "Food, money, sex, justice — those are the big motivators of human behavior [in commedia]. Then, entering into play, really engaging — with the audience, with each other." Actors also struggle to achieve the required size without losing a sense of truth; isn't this always the problem on stage?

"These archetypes live on in our popular culture," Fields reiterates. "Old men will be old men; the ice queens, the widows, the lovers — they're with us today."

Whom do you fantasize about playing opposite (whether a celebrity or a colleague) and why? Send your answers, for possible inclusion in an upcoming Craft column, to jeanschiff@earthlink.net.