

# Commedia dell'Arte

## The Essential Scenario - Actors Freedom

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Why and how Commedia dell'Arte is special becomes more evident each year. Roving Classical Commedia University\* (\*totally unaccredited) founded the summer of 2001 teaches classical Commedia dell'Arte as close to how we believe it was performed in the mid-late 1500's.

Theater as well as our whole entertainment industry uses Commedia dell'Arte. You can see Commedia dell'Arte through out the two 2010 summers Shakespeare plays performed in NYC's Central Park at the Delcourt Theatre, "**Winters Tale**" and "**Merchant of Venice**". Auditioning for parts in film and commercials, several elements of Commedia dell'Arte come into play. Our industry uses Commedia dell'Arte improvisation, stock characters, history, scenario, movement, prop object manipulation, voice work and an actors wide variety of knowledge, all elements of Commedia dell'Arte.

Being on both side of the casting table – people that cast any project juggle many facts and talents to cast that one part, for the hundreds or thousands of actors that want it. How does this art form from the mid late 1500's help almost five hundred years later?

A basic element of Commedia dell'Arte is working with a scenario. The Commedia dell'Arte actor improvises from action point to action point. Finding a good translation of an Italian scenario in English for the actor is not easy. Explaining a working scenario for the Commedia dell'Arte actor is necessary.

1. Take a play, remove all the dialogue, keeping or replacing it with condensed basic motivated action and what each character is tasked with performing on stage.
2. Replacing and condensing lines further with specific action points. What each character needs to accomplish to inform and move the story in each scene.
3. Include lazzi moments that are a required, sometime included or hinted at. *Lazzi is a bit of rehearsed stage business, which can be physical, musical, verbal, acrobatic or otherwise. My understanding it is almost always well rehearsed choreographed and memorized.*
4. Include who is in each scene listed on the margins edge. The actors will easily know when they need to come on stage and what they are tasked with.

5. If you have a 70 to 90-page play the scenario would be about 5 to 7 pages. This tells you how condensed scenarii are along with how free the Commedia dell'Arte actors is to create within the scenario. Take this freedom into your work today.

The Commedia dell'Arte actor knows and is, his or her character along with their unique habits and eccentricities. Seeing their assignment in the scenario, each beat or action point that needs to be accomplished on stage. Actor's jump into the improvisational void always saying yes to any and all action their counterparts throws at them. Remembering story line points to hit in each beat in order to move the plot and actions forward. Actors can go off on a tangent but always accomplishing their action points that are needed with their fellow actors. It is a bit like a Talmudic debate. One makes a point and everyone can go off on far reaching tangents. Always listening to each other they come back to the central point and/or action. It is a must to work with and not against your fellow player. There are those wonderful times when you work "with" your fellow actors as the Commedia dell'Arte actors did in the 1500 and 1600's. Most Commedia dell'Arte companies, like the scenarii had 10 characters or players. Working with each other is not a choice, it is vital.

We know Commedia dell'Arte was improvised from scenarii because of the church censors of the 1500's and 1600's. The church censors letters of complaints talk about how it is impossible to censor "them"; because every show is different and they come up with the most unbelievable things to do that one would never think of, when you tell them not to do something. Also from the Commedia dell'Arte actor letters, complaining about, *lets call them straight actors in the late 1600's*, the unbelievability of going on stage and saying the same words every show! This was unthinkable for to the Commedia dell'Arte player! There are schools, people teaching and writing today that are now saying Commedia dell'Arte was not that improvised, everything was pretty much set. Historical evidence contradicts this. In theater of today it is always safer to set things, to make sure they will work and be successful on stage, plus it take away the "risk" of failure. The word "**risk**" is key. If you are not risking what the "&%#\*" are you doing on stage, in the theatre arts, why are you doing theatre and not real-estate if you want safety? It is theatre, live theatre, not dead theatre. Theater is risk weather you are performing, writing or producing, on stage, film or television. Enjoy the improvisational void and risk.

In an audition, look at a script in terms of scenario and what needs to be accomplish using the author's words. Being real is vital, when using Commedia dell'Arte masks, if you are pretending rather than being totally in the moment or void, the mask will fall. Meaning it will look like there is a mask coving your face, you will not be the character. When one is totally in the masks or carrying

the mask all the audience/casting director sees is your total character. This is the state being one wishes to be in with or without a mask. In some good auditions at some point the casting director may ask you to improvise. Commedia dell'Arte tools come in very handy at that point. For you to be great yourself you must work with your fellow auditioner's. This requires several skills. An example, there were 5 people all auditioning together. No one was paying any attention to the any of the other 4 actors except one, who was doing something funny, trying to play/communicate with the other actors. The casting director actually stopped the auditions and yelled at the four actors in disbelief, "*It is ok you can react to him!*" Him, being the one actor playing and risking.

Another central tool for the Commedia dell'Arte actor; a fellow actor never directs or tells their fellow actors what to do. Why? Because it limits possibilities of improvisation, improvisation with goals can result in the best drama and comedy. The Commedia dell'Arte actor always builds on what is present and given in the moment. They never say no. Always say yes to all action and situations. Commedia dell'Arte players live in risk in the void like all theatre should. In a film audition go over the script. Memorized it. Memorized its action points so you will be able to play within the scenario of the script. One moment during an improvisation based on the script can get you the role. Risking and *risking wisely* is vital.

Read some of **Flaminio Scala's "Scenarios of the Commedia dell'Arte"** you will quickly begin to say, this sounds like Shakespeare. Yes, everything but Shakespeare's histories. Take NY Shakespeare in the Park 2010 **Winters Tale**. The second act is almost a different play straight from the Commedia dell'Arte with **Brighella** and **Arlecchino**. **Autolycus** played by **Hamish Linklater** an excellent Brighella. There was **Arlecchino** played by **Max Wright** in the guise of the Shepard's son with the two performing a *lazzi* of **Brighella** stealing everything from Arlecchino including his pants and glasses. You also had **Brighella** with his many women he is known for. In **Merchant of Venice** you have **Dottore Graziano** from the Commedia dell'Arte who is known for talking endlessly - his name is even the same. **Pantalone** worries about his daughter and his money; of course the daughter running off with her lover that her father object's to and his money is taken as well. Everyone is always trying to steal **Pantalone's** money; in this case it is **Shylock** as **Pantalone** played by **Al Pacino**. Then you have the women at the end of the play dressing up as men and saving the men, their lovers from a bad situation. A woman turning the situation is very **Isabella Andrine**. She is known as the first professional actress, dieing in childbirth in 1604 with her 7<sup>th</sup> child. Isabella who always turned the tables and situations in the Commedia dell'Arte and her writings inspiring women of the 1500's and 1600's to use their own power to change situations to the better and their advantage.

During film shoots when you are playing a character with the director giving you the freedom you may experience Commedia dell'Arte improvisation within the scenario of the scene. Taking what the director tells you about the character and scenes, working within the lines, knowing your parameters and key points to hit. Then the call, action! "**Curb Your Enthusiasm**" the television show is improvised using a scenario. On the set you will see the actors improvise the same scene several times always hitting the same point that are needed. Some directors will have you use their film script as a Commedia dell'Arte scenario. The actors must know the key points and lines that must be hit. Jumped into that void with your fellow actors, letting the lines come where they need to resulting in driving the action with real moments, on film. If you are given a prop, use it. Commedia dell'Arte prop manipulation is vital. You must investigate your prop. Play with it. Get to know it. Even if the only time you have is while they are reloading the camera. Improvising within the scenario of the script and being in the mask of the character. Not a physical mask but the essence. Suddenly many elements Commedia dell'Arte actors used in the late 1500's you are now using in film.

These are a few points of what is special about Commedia dell'Arte. Played by it self it can be the most powerful side splitting moving theatre. Using Commedia dell'Arte in our entertainment industry today, it is part of it. Enjoy your actor's freedom risking wisely.