Commedia dell'Arte

AN ACTOR'S HANDBOOK

JOHN RUDLIN

ROUTLEDGE
Taylor & Francis Group

COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE
An Actor's Handbook

Commedia dell'Arte: an Actor's Handbook is an entertaining and highly illuminating account of Commedia's origins as a popular theatrical form, **plus** a practical and timely step-by-step guide to using Commedia techniques in performance.

John Rudlin usefully provides sample dialogues and monologues, and explains each stock character's 'type' in turn, covering his or her:

- name
- costume
- stance
- gestures
- relationships
- status
- mask
- walks
- speech
- plot functions
- origin
- props
- movements
- characteristics
- improvisations

In the final section of the book Rudlin charts the experiments of twentieth-century directors and artistes in 'reconstructing and revitalising a form which dominated European popular culture for three centuries'.

Commedia dell'Arte: an Actor's Handbook is an unusually lively and absorbing book which makes a vital contribution both to theatre history and theatre making.

John Rudlin is Senior Lecturer in Drama at the University of Exeter. He co-edited and translated *Copeau: Texts on Theatre* (Routledge, 1989) with Norman H.Paul.

COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE
An Actor's Handbook

John Rudlin

London and New York

First published 1994
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2003.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

ISBN 0-203-40819-5 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-71643-4 (Adobe eReader Format)
ISBN 0-415-04769-2 (hbk)
ISBN 0-415-04770-6 (pbk)

per Dina e Marcellina

Contents

Illustrations

Introduction

> The actor may get bored with perfecting his craft in order to perform in outdated plays; soon he will want not only to act but to compose for himself as well. Then at last we shall see the rebirth of the theatre of improvisation.[1]
>
> MEYERHOLD

The purpose of this book is to help give *commedia dell'arte* back to the actor in the hope that it may again provide one of the base languages of a theatrical lingua franca. It is also founded on a personal conviction that if there is to be a regeneration of the theatrical medium in the next century, it must come via the re-empowering of the performer rather than the continued hegemony of playwright and director. In saying that, I am minded that the etymology of the word Esperanto, designed in 1887, derives from the Latin verb for to hope. Commedia, however, is an actual language, dispersed and fallen into disrepair, rather than an artificial one with a majority purpose and a minority uptake.

Throughout the twentieth century the question has been (and still remains despite the efforts of Craig, Meyerhold, Copeau, Reinhardt and later directors) how to retrieve information from scholarship in such a way that actors' efforts at self-authored Commedia improvisation are not merely illustrative of what the original form may have been like. Craig was first to the heart of the problem:

> History, to creative minds, is often a dry dead thing. It is the story of the past. Creators are concerned with the Present and the Future. It concerns our old friends Harlequin, Pantaloon, Pulcinella or Punch and their companions…the Doctor, Brighella, Scaramuccia, Coviello and the Captain. What fun, you think. Yes, what fun…but what genius also, for the inventors of these figures were men of genius. Whether the inventors were peasants or

> actors or both is immaterial. The point has not yet been decided: but it has been very clearly decided and recorded that the inventors were not *play-writers*.[2]

Towards the end of the century his point has still not been decided and furthermore it never can be, at least not by scholarship alone as Kenneth Richards and Laura Richards, in their recent translation of key source documents, allow:

> For all that we possess a wealth of documentation, literary and pictorial, from its beginnings through to its apparent decline, the *commedia dell'arte* remains elusive. What were its origins? Can it appositely be called a species of 'popular' theatre? Was it characterised primarily by improvised performance, and if so, how was the improvisation executed…?[3]

The fact is that scholars, directors, teachers and actors alike are dealing with an oral tradition, not a literary one: a phenomenon of the folk which became part of their lore before being patronised by the mighty, an organic growth from popular origins which only latterly became a set of cultivated conventions that could be adopted by 'play-writers'. The culture of the people was illiterate, but only in the sense that, say, many an Irish jig violinist cannot read music. Those who can notate find such improvisations almost impossible to score. As with folk music, there is a literacy of performance of Commedia which was originally developed without a conscious sense of culture as a common social denominator between performer and spectator.

In Augusto Boal's view, what separates the human community from that of other primates with species-specific vocal and bodily sign systems is theatre. As in monkey language,

> originally, actor and spectator coexisted in the same person; when they separated, when some became specialised into actors and others into spectators, then theatrical forms, as we know them today, were formed. 'Theatres' were also born, destined to sanctify this division, this specialisation. The profession of the 'actor' was born.[4]

During the sixteenth century in Italy, actors took pre-existing folk forms, improvised masking, music and dance and developed them into a theatrical medium. Over the next two centuries the performance techniques they developed were passed on highly selectively to their siblings and other younger members of their troupes as, virtually, professional secrets. There is a marked similarity with Japanese Noh theatre in this respect: the symbol or *kana* for Noh means 'accomplishment' or 'professional ability'; the word *arte*

(which will be discussed further in the chapter on 'Origins'), should properly be translated as a combination of 'tradesmanship' and 'artistic know-how'. Within the family-based *Ryu* of the Noh the treatises of Zeami, its first great actor, were passed from generation to generation in secret veneration, remaining unpublished until 1909, when the need for spectators as specialised in understanding as actors in performing had become essential to the survival of the form. No such treatise exists for Commedia, however: the works of Perucci, Riccoboni, Gherardi, etc. were written in hindsight during the mature inflorescence of Commedia and do not reveal much that is of use to a more than general reader. Barry Grantham, as 'Harlequin in Residence', wrote in the programme of the 1985 Brighton Festival (which was devoted to Commedia):

> Unfortunately for present day performers these skills were regarded as professional secrets and they produced no handy manual for our use. The evidence has to be sought, not only in Commedia sources, but in those related contemporary performing arts. Our understanding can also be considerably enlarged by attempting to set up 'laboratory conditions' duplicating the circumstances in which the comedians worked. We then compare the experience gained with the material, particularly iconographic, that we do have against that of more easily recoverable recent traditions like pantomime, Music Hall, and a particularly rich source, the silent movie.[5]

It is a function of training to conduct such a quest, of active research through practice, rather than archaeological reconstruction. In doing so, the benefits of the *arte,* paradoxically, may not be just for the practising or intending professional actor, but also for developing a literacy of performance in the non-specialist. Throughout the twentieth century there have been schools attempting the former, notably Copeau's at the Vieux Colombier in Paris and Burgundy, Dullin's at the Atelier in Paris, Saint-Denis's in London, New York and Canada and Lecoq's in Milan and again in Paris. At the present time, American schools such as the Dell Arte, our own courses in the Exeter University Drama Department, the *stages* led by Carlo Boso and Patrick Pezin and above all, in my experience, Antonio Fava's International School of the Comic Actor in Reggio Emilia, continue to make investigations. Craig's question and affirmation remain with us: 'Is it possible? Can a Drama which holds the stage for two centuries be created without the assistance of the literary man? It can. Then if it can be created once it can be created twice? It can.'[6]

The present volume is dedicated to that possibility and, as well as collating otherwise diverse information under a single cover, seeks to offer the English reader more demystification of professional secrets than available elsewhere

and, perhaps, just enough 'do-it-yourself' possibilities to suggest that *commedia dell'arte* can point the way forward as well as back, in the search for a common international language of live performance.

First, though, a short trace on when, why and how Commedia 'died' (or rather went into suspended animation) may help to set the scene. No theatre form fully dies until the culture which generated it disappears. Even then fragments remain for scholars to pore over, shards from which to make guesswork reconstructions as, for example, has been the case with Greek tragedy. *Commedia dell'arte,* too, was thought to have perished as a living theatre form as long ago as the late eighteenth century. Originally a folk form, as the first chapter of this book attempts to chronicle (popular history being often so sparsely documented), Commedia had progressively been monopolised by well-to-do 'society', painted and engraved by artists such as Callot, Watteau and Domenico Tiepolo, written up by playwrights such as Goldoni, Molière, Beaumarchais and Marivaux, and, eventually, like any other fashion, condemned as outmoded; a seemingly exhausted seam of amusement which it was no longer rewarding to work.

> The old *commedia dell'arte* had sunk into decrepitude. It was not merely that the type itself was exhausted, though subsequent circumstances proved this to be the case. What was more important is, that the popular taste veered round against it. Under the prevailing dominance of French fashions, a style of drama, hither-to unknown to the Italians, came into vogue. The so-called *comédie larmoyante,* or pathetic comedy (of which Nivelle de la Chaussée, a now forgotten archimage of middle-class sentimentalities and sensibilities, is the reputed inventor), caught the ear of Europe.[7]

Like so many of the vital rites of yesteryear, Commedia was relegated to the nursery where its imagery, in bowdlerised form, continued to animate the minds of the young through toys and picture books. The outward shell was returned to the people for whom, in the fairground booth and the puppet show, it lived on as popular as gondolas and gallopers—and arguably as culturally significant. We now know that it also survived as theatre, not only in the bizarre afterpiece of the English pantomime, the harlequinade, but also in modest touring companies in Italy, the country of its origin, where—like most commonplaces—no one bothered to record it. The sole example of such a troupe surviving to the present day is that of the Carrara family, whose work is described in Part II of this book.

By the mid-nineteenth century, however, a consciousness of something special being lost, of a unique species endangered almost to extinction, was already stirring. One dull evening in the winter of 1846 at Nohant in France, near La Châtre in Berry, a group of genteel literati composed of the novelist

George Sand, her family and a circle of close acquaintances including her current partner, the ailing Chopin, decided over dinner to pass the rest of the evening playing charades. 'It was Chopin who invented the theatre at Nohant. In the beginning it was he who improvised at the piano while the young people acted scenes or danced comic ballets.'[8]

The scenario of their first playlet, a curious piece entitled *The Indelicate Druid,* was devised during the main course, read out during the dessert and performed an hour later. This extempore method formed the accidental basis of their later discoveries, as from the outset they instinctively eschewed written texts for their scenes. Gradually these *divertissements* became more and more complex, as did their subsequent analysis of them:

> We naturally began to discuss the origins of theatre; none of us had studied them, some were still children with no notions, however vague, of the history of this art form. We asked ourselves what theatre really was, and if the convention of written dialogue had not destroyed rather than enhanced it.[9]

After exploring and discussing in their amateur academy all the phases of Greek, Roman and medieval popular forms, they finally came to one which seemed to them to be the most extraordinary and fascinating, the Italian *commedia dell'arte:*

> We looked through two volumes of comic operas…but found nothing that would serve our purpose, but we took well-known names, each creating a type that whose character and costume was to their liking: Scaramouche, Pierrot, Cassandre, Léandre, Colombine. We mixed them up with all sorts of situations set in different eras.[10]

Obviously, from the names used, the Masks they played with initially were the Franco-Italian transplants of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, not the original sixteenth century forms of the Italian piazzas, or their reference would have been rather to Scaramuccia, Pedrolino, Pantalone, Leandro and Colombina. But, as we will see, *commedia dell'arte* had spread itself all over Europe as companies found they could profit more from exile than from the strictures of the Council of Trent. Dissemination went as far as Russia, Czechoslovakia and Denmark, and wherever Commedia found itself, without compromising in essentials, it adjusted to local circumstances and such national variations contributed to, rather than detracted from, its universality. Developments made in France in the seventeenth century were even reimported to Italy by the itinerant companies.

In Nohant, two centuries later, the game of reconstruction now became a fixation which lasted until January 1848, resulting in the creation of a small

theatre with a wardrobe and scenery, then a marionette theatre, before finally recording its research in a book written by one of George Sand's two sons, Maurice. Their work, and that book, have remained a crucial resource throughout the twentieth century. It is possible, even, that Maurice Sand's illustrations for his own book have had too much influence, fixing the fixed characters in his image of them. (See Plate 20.)

The still living resource for the amateur researcher/performers of Nohant was the *théâtre de la foire* where the Italian Commedia performers had retreated after the closure of the Parisian Théâtre Italien in 1697. They had not been allowed back on the legitimate stage until 1716, by which time many had permanently returned to the ways of the piazza:

> The Italian players in France went back to an earlier day, reverting to the portable trestle stage and lustier repertoire of their ancestors, travelling through the country at a discreet distance from the capital, and experiencing hardship of a kind they had never imagined.[11]

Dialogue was not permitted in the fairs by law, except in the puppet booths, so the live actors had to go back to their origins as jugglers, tumblers, dancers,

1 An English country fair c. 1820 showing *commedia dell'arte* influenced characters barking outside a booth. Colombina remains a traditional *danseuse*, Pedrolino is on buskins, and the figure on his knees may be a *zanni*. Note the audience queuing up the steps.

singers and pantomimists. This was the nature of the *commedia dell'arte* which crossed the Channel to the English fairs, where it was commonly used for 'barking' outside the booths as a catchpenny box-office attraction, with more legitimate and less fantastical fare being played within. When English spectators attended a Pantomime in a theatre in winter and saw Clown, Pantaloon, Harlequin and Colombine dance on at the end after the transformation scene, they were renewing acquaintance with figures last seen on a summer's day before going into a tent to watch a play.

Throughout the twentieth century there have been many revivals of *commedia dell'arte* based on attempts as enthusiastic as that at Nohant to revive the Masks. Some, but by no means all, of these essays are discussed in Part III of this book, along with experiments in the invention of new stock characters on the assumption that the old ones have lost their social relevance. Such endeavours seek to go beyond resurrection of a supposedly dead form, hoping new life will spring from the turning over of old roots. The distinction between reconstruction and renovation will be a constant throughout, and I have had the opportunity of conducting experiments along both lines with students, whose contribution to the growth of the body of information which forms this work is incalculable.

Commedia has also disseminated itself into other art forms and aspects of twentieth-century cultural consciousness: Stravinsky, Diaghilev, Cocteau, Picasso, Busoni, to name but a few, have all used it as a working base. Many of its techniques have re-emerged, without scholarly prompting, in the silent films of Chaplin, Keaton, Laurel and Hardy *et al.*, and in the talkies of the Marx Brothers. And in order for this to happen, the techniques of Italian, Jewish and Irish humour had first been melded in the pot of vaudeville. The present concern, however, is with the platform stage rather than the silver screen, and studying it will involve initial examination of European origins rather than New World evolutions.

Until its unification in the nineteenth century, Italy, like Europe today, consisted of an association of sovereign states. As a pan-Italian form, the *commedia dell'arte* had, therefore, necessarily to develop in a polyglot manner, using a vocabulary drawn from the northern city states and from the regions of the south. Its characters represent basic types from those states, each speaking in a dialect/language largely incomprehensible to the inhabitants of the others. There were, in effect, three divisions: the north, providing the 'four Masks'—Arlecchino and Brighella (Bergamese), Pantalone (Venetian), Il Dottore (Bolognese); the south—Pulcinella, Tartaglia, Coviello and Il Capitano (Neapolitan or Calabrese); and Tuscany, which provided the literary tongue befitting the manners of the Lovers and the female servant. As the Commedia players strolled from state to state, local characters would come into greater prominence in the scenarios chosen, carrying a higher burden of speech, often at the expense of the other masks who became less sympathetic, the butt of humour in the way

that *stranieri* often are. But the main language of all the Masks was action—the Esperanto of the stage.

Thus the preoccupation of the first part of this book is with the period of initial growth of *commedia dell'arte* in the the second half of the sixteenth century and its flowering of the early part of the seventeenth. During these years, Commedia, emerging as it did out of Carnival, was of an occasional nature: like fairground showmen, companies, particularly the minor ones (about which we know very little), would follow an annual celebratory calendar and a complementary touring schedule. The 'great' companies, the Gelosi, the Confidenti, the Accessi, the Uniti, the Fideli, would be required at events of national as well as local significance. The Gelosi were called to Paris, for example, to celebrate the wedding of Henri III's daughter in 1572, but were captured around Lyon by Huguenot insurgents. Ransom was set as the release of 1,000 recently captured prisoners, a price which the king readily paid rather than lose face at the nuptials. Tommaso Garzoni (who rarely had a good word to say about anybody) gives an inglorious picture of the reality of life on the road in the 1580s for a less exalted troupe:

> Thanks to them, the art of the comedy lies buried in the mud, lords banish them from their lands, the law holds them in contempt, different nations scorn them in a variety of ways and the whole world, as if to punish them for their improper conduct, rightly rejects them. Thus you find the companies split up: the Signora is in Parma, the Magnifico in Venice, the Courtesan in Padua, the Zanni in Bergamo, Gratiano in Bologna, and licences and permits have to be sought on every side if they wish to act and earn their living, because everyone is sickened by this vile race that spreads disarray everywhere and introduces a thousand scandals wherever it goes. This is the reason, according to Valerio, why the city of Marseilles never wishes to suffer the presence of strollers and buffoons. When they enter a city, immediately a drum makes it known that the gentlemen players have arrived. The Signora, dressed as a man and with sword in hand, advances to survey the field, inviting the public to a comedy or a tragedy or a pastoral in a palace at the Pilgrim Inn, to which the mob, by nature eager for novelties and curiosities, immediately rushes to get seats and, paying for its entrance money, enters the hall that has been prepared. Here you find a fit-up stage and a scene crudely depicted in charcoal; you put up with an opening concert like that of asses and hornets; you hear a prologue from a charlatan; a clumsy tune like Brother Stopino's; an action as painful as a malady, and murderous interludes; a Magnifico not worth a toss; a Zanni who's a goose; a Gratiano who squitters words; a daft, witless Courtesan; a Lover who saws his arms at

2 Pierrot, Colombine and a Captain/Harlequin and Colombine in a 1923 art deco confection by John Austen illustrating *The Adventures of Harlequin* by Francis Bickley.

> every speech; a Spaniard who can say nothing but 'Mi vida' and 'Mi carazon'; a Pedant who drops into Tuscan at every line; a Burattino who knows no other gesture than to put his cap on his head; a Signora like a monster in her speech, dead in her delivery, soporific in her gestures, at perpetual war with the Graces and locked in a major altercation with Beauty.[12]

One wonders what Garzoni would make of the average 'sitcom'. Somehow the popularity of *commedia dell'arte* survived his onslaught and, since then, every era has tended to reinvent Commedia in its own image, often relying solely on an increasingly simplistic reinterpretation of the confection of its predecessor. Eventually such a mixture was bound to become so dilute as to be ineffectual.

> Recently it has been a fashion to proclaim the *commedia dell'arte* a theatre of proletarian protest against oppression, an idea first put forward in 1914 by Konstantin Miklashevski.[13] …There is even less to justify as *commedia dell'arte,* a movement arising at the end of the last century, which sought to borrow its characters as symbols of the artist/poet in his struggle against philistinism; or that for the Pierrots, Harlequins and Colombines of the 1920s that flitted so charmingly across a moonlit stage or an Art Deco mantelpiece.[14]

My plea, then, is for a reinterpretation based on what is known of the root form: it is thus not merely chronology that leads next to a discussion of origins.

I have standardised the use of *commedia dell'arte,* even when quoting from others, as Italian and have accepted Commedia (as being a species of Comedy) into English. Scenario has already been received and for this reason I use a plural of scenarios, not 'scenari'. *Lazzi,* although becoming current in English (possibly more so than in contemporary Italian!), I have left italicised since the singular form *lazzo* is rare and I find *'lazzis'* unnecessary. The word Mask is given an initial capital when referring to a Commedia character, not when referring to a mask as a physical object. Similarly, Zanni when referring to the Mask as a character, *zanni* when meaning the type in general.

All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

Part I

The *commedia dell'arte*

Origins

> In certain fiestas the very notion of order disappears. Chaos comes back and licence rules. Anything is permitted: the customary hierarchies vanish, along with all social, sex, caste and trade distinctions. Men disguise themselves as women, gentlemen as slaves, the poor as rich. The army, the law and the clergy are ridiculed. Obligatory sacrilege, ritual profanation is committed. Love becomes promiscuity. Sometimes the fiesta becomes a Black Mass. Regulations, habits and customs are violated. Respectable people put away the dignified expressions and conservative clothes that isolate them, dress up in gaudy colours, hide behind a mask, and escape from themselves.[1]
>
> OCTAVIO PAZ

The professional name

In order to clear the ground to begin discussion of the origins of *commedia dell'arte*, scholarly caveats as to what the phrase itself means and how to translate it need reiteration. For example:

> The name *commedia dell'arte* is difficult to translate. Literally it approximates 'comedy of the artists', implying performances by professionals as distinguished from the courtly amateurs. This form has been given other names which are more revealing of its nature and characteristics. These include *commedia alla maschera* (masked comedy), *commedia improvviso* (improvised comedy), and *commedia dell'arte all'improvviso*.[2]

Moreover, in fact

> the very term *la commedia dell'arte* was never used of the activities of actors or professional acting companies until the eighteenth century, when we find Carlo Goldoni employing it to distinguish the masked and improvised drama from the scripted comedy that as a dramatist he himself favoured…. Earlier terms used of the professional players and companies tend to be rather more specific: *la commedia degli Zanni, la commedia a soggetto, la commedia all'italiana,* or *la commedia mercenaria*.[3]

The actual phrase is not used by Andrea Perrucci in his *Dell'arte rappresentativa, premeditata ed all'improvviso,* written as late as 1699. To his *all'improvviso* one could add, from other period sources, *commedia non scritta, sei maschere,* and, outside Italy, simply Italian Comedy.

But once noted, these earlier alternative terms can be ignored: what is important is to distinguish a genus (which we now call *commedia dell'arte*), that was professional, masked and initially publicly improvised on temporary outdoor platforms in simple costumes, from the contemporaneous *commedia erudita,* which was acted by amateur *dilettanti,* scripted and performed without the mask and in elaborate costume on the private indoor stages of the courts. *Arte* can be translated into English not only as 'art', but also as 'craft' and 'know-how'. Dario Fo underlines that it also indicates licence: the granting of professional and therefore protected status:

> *Commedia dell'arte* means comedy performed by professionals, those who are recognised as artists. Only artists recognised by the authorities were classified as Commedia actors. The word *arte* in fact implied the incorporation of the dramatic arts; it brought together those who were authorised to perform for the counts, dukes, etc.[4]

For Fo, then, the nomenclature *commedia dell'arte* indicates a social rather than an artistic phenomenon, meaning above all the association of professionals. It was through such association that comedians pledged themselves to mutual protection and respect, commensurate to the closed shops of the medieval English guilds. In Italy too, individual 'professional' actors had probably been employed by other guilds to feature in their annual religious plays. By the mid-sixteenth century such individual performers were in search of a form which would enable them to band together. In understanding the significance of *dell'arte,* therefore, one needs perhaps to imagine companies creating a form of theatre called 'Equity' rather than that which we now call a trade union. The first known contract within such a company reads, in part, as follows:

> The undersigned companions, namely Maprio known as Zanini from Padua, Vincentio from Venice, Francesco de la Lira, Hieronimo from San Luca, Zuandomengo known as Rizo, Zuane from Triviso, Tofan de Bastian and Francesco Moschini, desiring to form a fraternal company, which will last until the first day of next Lent in 1546, and will begin on the eighth day of next Easter, have decided and deliberated, in order that the company continue fraternally until the aforesaid day, without bitterness, rancour or dissolution, to make and observe between themselves…the following articles, under pain of forfeit of the undermentioned moneys.
>
> Firstly, they have with common accord elected Maprio as their leader….
>
> Item, that if by any chance one of the aforesaid companions should fall ill, that he be aided and assisted by means of the common purse….
>
> Item, that if the company is required to tour, all members be obliged to do so and that all agreements made should be by the aforementioned Zanini.[5]

And the list goes on to include details of the keeping of the cash box and the communal ownership of the horse. As well as such internal safeguards, *dell'arte* members were also able to call on external protection from local authorities if rogue companies materialised on their patch and, for this reason, written permission to perform was often sought in advance by an itinerant troupe. Famous companies could also use their connections to oust the competition; for example, Isabella Andreini of the Gelosi wrote to the governor of Milan:

> in so far as they intend to erect a stage in the public square in order to play comedy, or rather to ruin it, we accordingly beg that you write to Sig. Podestà telling him that you do not consent to their doing so.[6]

Fo concludes, in his *Manuale minimo dell'attore,* that history has not perhaps settled on the most accurate locution:

> I find correct, in fact, the idea proposed by some scholars, of calling this genre, instead of *commedia dell'arte,* more specifically 'comedy of the comedians' or 'of the actors'. The entire theatrical transaction rests on their shoulders: the actor as histrion and author, stage manager, storyteller, director.[7]

The amateur connection

There was interaction, other than patronage of the Players by the Gentlemen, between the *commedia dell'arte* and the *commedia erudita*. In plotting their scenarios in particular, the Commedia troupes seem to have adopted much from the latter form which, in turn, attempted little which did not derive from Plautus and Terence—for example *Calandria* by Cardinal Bibbiena, which, like Shakespeare's later *Comedy of Errors,* is based on Plautus' *Menaechmi*. Also, as the professional improvised comedy looked to extend its range, it imported a basis for the roles of the Lovers from the repertoire of the amateurs, who in turn had developed the limited possibilities afforded by the Roman comedies (where women of social standing were not allowed to be portrayed). The Miles Gloriosus (boastful soldier) was similarly appropriated.

There is, however, a historical problem in that the first recorded instance of something approaching a fully developed Commedia performance is in fact of one given by *dilettanti*. The composer Massimo Trojano wrote the following description in dialogue form of a court performance in which he was involved in Bavaria in 1568:

Fortunio:…in the evening was presented an Italian comedy, in the presence of all the ladies of high rank. Even though the most part of them could not understand what he was saying, Messer Orlando Lasso—the Venetian Magnifico, with his Zanni, played so well and so agreeably that all their jaws ached from laughing.

Marinio: Be good enough to relate the subject of the comedy to me.

Fortunio: The previous day, his Lordship, the Duke William of Bavaria, had the notion of attending a comedy the next evening. Having summoned Messer Orlando Lasso who he knew to be a man of general resourcefulness, he asked that one be instantly prepared. The latter, not wishing to refuse anything which would please his good master…relayed the whole request to Massimo Trojano and thought up an appealing subject. They made up the scenario together. In the first act, the prologue was read by a peasant from Cava, dressed so comically that he could have been taken for the messenger of laughter.

Marinio: Tell me, how many characters were there?

Fortunio: Ten, and the comedy was in three acts.

Marinio: It would be very interesting to know the names of all the actors.

Fortunio: The estimable Messer Orlando Lasso played the role of *Magnifico Messer Pantalone de Bisognosi;* Messer Gio Battista Scolari

de Trento played the Zanni; Massimo Trojano played three roles: the prologue under the guise of a stupid peasant, that of the Lover *Polydoro* and that of the jealous Spaniard, under the name of *don Diego di Mendoza*. Polydoro's valet was don Carlo Livizzano and the valet of the Spaniard, Giorgio Dori, from Trento. The courtesan *Camilla,* in love with Polydoro, was the marquis de *Malaspina,* her serving maid was Ercole Terzo, who also played a French valet. Coming back to the comedy, after the prologue was read, Messer Orlando had a pleasing madrigal sung by five people, whilst Massimo who had just played the peasant changed into the costume of red velvet with gold braiding above and below the waist, a hat of black velvet trimmed with magnificent sables, and appeared on stage accompanied by his valet. He thanked his happy stars and said he was proud to live in a kingdom where love, abundance and joy held sway; but then the Frenchman appeared, the valet of his brother Fabrizio, sent from the country with a letter containing very sad news. Polydoro read the letter out loud, sighing deeply, called Camilla, explained the reason for his departure, embraced her and, having thus made his farewells, departed. From the other side of the stage Messer Orlando then appeared dressed as a Magnifico, in a camisole of red satin, red Venetian stockings, a black cloak which came right down to the ground and his face covered with a mask that made people laugh at first sight. He held a lute in his hand and sang and played:

> Whoever walks this street without a sigh
> He is a happy man.

After having sung twice, he put down his lute and began to lament over his love, saying 'Oh, poor Pantalone, who cannot pass this street without making the air resound with sighs, without soaking the ground with tears!' Everyone laughed till they could do no more, and all the time that Pantalone was on stage, all you could hear were bursts of laughter, and, above all, my dear Marino, when Pantalone had spoken both by himself and with Camilla, Zanni appeared, who had not seen his Pantalone for several years, and who, walking carelessly, bumped hard into him. They started to quarrel, then they recognised each other and Zanni, mad with joy, seized his master by the shoulders and began turning him round like a windmill as fast as he could, after which Pantalone did the same to him. Eventually they both found themselves flat on their backs. Getting up, they talked about one thing and another, after which Zanni asked after his old mistress, Pantalone's wife, and learned in reply that she was already dead. They both began

howling like wolves, and Zanni cried as he remembered the macaronis and the sauces that she prepared for him to eat. After a good cry, they cheered up again, and the master commanded his valet to carry some chickens to Camilla, his beloved. Zanni promised to speak in his favour, but did just the opposite. Pantalone left the stage and Zanni, very timidly, approached Camilla's house. She became attached to Zanni (which is not surprising, since women often leave the good for the bad) and invited him to come into her house. Here a musical piece could be heard executed by five viola da gambas and as many voices. Imagine how funny that was! By God, in no comedy that I have seen has so much sincere laughter been heard!

Marinio: It has to be admitted that all that is very droll and amusing. Tell me more, for I am most interested.

Fortunio: In the second act Pantalone appeared, surprised that Zanni was so long in bringing him a reply. Then Zanni appeared with a letter from Camilla saying that if Pantalone wanted to gain her affection, he should dress in the costume that Zanni would provide for him. They both went off gaily to change clothes. Then the Spaniard came on 'with his heart plunged into that ocean of fury which is known as jealousy', and he recounted to his valet the great deeds he had performed and how many hundred men he had slain with his own hands in the barque of Caron. And now a mere woman had stolen his courageous heart. Drawn by love, he made his way to Camilla and asked her to let him in. Through clever wheedling, Camilla managed to obtain a necklace from him and promised him a rendezvous for the same evening. The Spaniard departed, happy. Then Pantalone appeared, dressed as Zanni and Zanni in his master's clothes. They put their heads together for a long time with Pantalone asking his valet's advice as to what he should say. Finally they both went into Camilla's house. Then music was played with four voices and two lutes, a mandolin, a recorder and a bass viola da gamba.

In the third act, Polydoro, who was Camilla's protector, came back from the country, entered the house and found Pantalone inside dressed in simple clothes. To his question 'Who is this?' came the reply that he was a porter and that Donna Camilla wanted him to carry a trunk full of clothes to her sister Doralice in Santo Cataldo. Polydoro believed this and said he should do so immediately. The ageing Pantalone was not able to pick up the trunk; he began to argue and finally revealed that he was of noble birth; but Polydoro, furious, seized a stick and thrashed him so soundly (to the great amusement of the audience) that he would not have forgotten it for a long time. After poor Pantalone had taken to his heels, Polydoro,

3 A few years after the amateur performance at the Bavarian court, professional Commedia troupes began to tour Southern Germany. On the walls of the bedchamber of.