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Arlecchino's Journey: Crossing Boundaries Through La Commedia Dell'arte

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ARLECCHINO’S JOURNEY: CROSSING BOUNDARIES THROUGH
LA COMMEDIA DELL’ARTE

By
Janine Michelle Sobeck

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Of a thesis submitted by

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ABSTRACT

ARLECCHINO’S JOURNEY: CROSSING BOUNDARIES THROUGH

*LA COMMEDIA DELL’ARTE*

Janine Michelle Sobeck

Department of Theatre and Media Arts

Master of Arts

*La commedia dell’arte* is a recognized, vibrant theatrical form that emerged in Italy during the Renaissance. However, while great attention has been given to the particulars of the genre (performance techniques, important troupes, leading players), there lacks a study behind the reasoning for its vast international popularity. In this thesis, I explore *why* this particular genre was able to cross cultural and linguistic boundaries, finding a dedicated and enthusiastic following in most European countries for over 200 years. After analyzing *commedia dell’arte’s* original development in the Italian peninsula, examining the predominating Carnival ideology and the ability of the troupes to establish both regional and national symbols through the creation of specific stock characters, I will concentrate on the international tours and performances. By looking at the adaptive qualities of the troupes, and specifically their ability to play off of Europe’s lack of national identity and Northern European’s fascination with their exotic southern neighbor, I will discuss the reaction of Northern Europe with the Italian theatre, with a detailed look into the success of the troupes abroad. The popularity of the troupes will also be explored through the unique adaptation, assimilation and adoption of *commedia dell’arte* techniques and characters into developing national theatres of the other
countries. I will conclude with a look of how *commedia dell’arte* has been and can continue to be effectively used in today’s theatre. The examination of what drew both native and foreign audiences to the *commedia dell’arte* performances opens up possibilities for modern practitioners who wish to capitalize on the ability of the troupes to successfully play to a wide spectrum of people.
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Chapter One: Introduction

This [commedia dell’arte] can’t be good theatre. It’s not realism. No one’s going to like it.
- Ricky R., upon hearing that I was directing her in a commedia dell’arte show, 2006

In the summer of 2006, I was hired to direct four shows at an all-girls performing arts center in Massachusetts, with girls ranging from ages 8-16. One of the shows I chose was The Red Hat, a contemporary canovaccio, or script scenario, based on the style and attributes of the Italian Renaissance era commedia dell’arte. The eight girls in my cast were all age 14, dedicated enough to improving their talents as theatre artists to commit to a full-time, eight week program during their summer break. None had ever studied, seen, or performed in a commedia dell’arte show and many showed resistance to the idea, with the popular idea that if it wasn’t realism, it wasn’t good theatre. Despite their protests and complaints, the show went into production.

In an effort to educate not only my cast but the audience (with the large majority also never having seen this genre performed), the show remained “classic” in presentation, and the weeks of rehearsal were dedicated to training my actors in this previously unknown style. Resistance and suspicion among the actors slowly ebbed away, replaced with delight, laughter and a healthy portion of nerves as they anticipated the response of their fellow classmates. Opening night was, to their intense relief and joy, an immense success. Both actors and audience members commented on their enthusiasm for the genre, their ability to identify with the characters on different levels (comically, personally and theatrically), and the possibilities of pushing the potential of
the genre even further once an elementary knowledge was provided to the audience.  

Requests to do another *commedia dell’arte* show and to establish a permanent *commedia dell’arte* program within the center were immediate and numerous. The comments and reviews of the show, specifically revolving around the style of presentation, prompted me to examine the appeal of *commedia dell’arte* to its audiences.

However, in the current trend of *commedia dell’arte* studies, this is an examination that is wanting. The present main focus revolves around a detailing of the leading attributes and characteristics of the genre as well as a chronological report of the main troupes. Scant attention is given to the impact of the distinct development of the genre both within Italy and abroad. Beyond the acceptance of the obvious and documented fact that the troupes were touring, and were immensely popular (a popularity that is usually gauged by the influences found in other European countries, from France to Russia), there lacks an in-depth look into the reasoning behind the success of *commedia dell’arte* troupes, especially in a time when internationally touring theatrical groups were not the norm. In a troubling trend, the questions of “Why” have been glanced over and left largely unanswered in favor of a detailed historical description of “What”.

While this historical setting is absolutely necessary in order to gain an understanding of the genre and provide an essential foundation to the studies, in my

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1 The potential effect of the genre was also evident in the other three shows of the summer. While not overtly, I employed many *commedia dell’arte* characteristics into all the other shows. With all three, the comments, enthusiasm and praise revolved around the integration of these specific techniques.

2 “Italy” at this point (before the 1861 unification) is a loose term. As will be discussed later in this thesis, the people of the land that we now geographically know as Italy were unable to establish a consistent national identity after the fall of the Roman Empire, and were continuously being divided, conquered, and re-arranged into city-states and kingdoms. Therefore, in this thesis, while recognizing the fact that “Italy” as we now call it does not exist, the term Italy will be used to define the area of land on the Italian peninsula.
opinion, it is the attempts of finding answers to the “Whys” that provides a deeper comprehension of *commedia dell’arte* studies. It also, perhaps more importantly, gives insight into the potential use and integration into modern theatre. Therefore, in this thesis, I wish to focus on these new set of questions: Why were commedia touring troupes so popular? Why did they rule the stages and courts of Europe for around 200 years, even longer than in their native country? Why was it that they seemed to find a home and a large following wherever they went? Why and how did people connect to this performing genre?

While these questions in themselves are large and subjective in nature, there is merit in looking at the conditions that the troupes were coming out of, in order to more fully understand the ability of these performers to tour in a time that was (initially) hostile to foreign travel, influence, and interaction. Currently, *commedia dell’arte* is accepted as a type of enigma, a theatre form with no provable origin, a long running international popularity, a highly publicized demise, and a recognized continuous influence on theater, art, and other mediums. However, with only a general acceptance of its immense popularity with no real explanation of why, the ability of modern practitioners to tap into, learn from and even stage commedia today is stunted. Insight into the reasons behind the success will not only be helpful to commedia scholars, but especially pertinent to modern theatrical practitioners who are interested in working across international boundaries.

Why is *commedia dell’arte*, a theatrical form that evolved out of a unique and specific culture, the genre that amassed huge popularity during the Renaissance, both in its native Italy as well as abroad? While there are several possible answers, a specific explanation stems from an in-depth look at the state of Europe and Italy during its
development. In this thesis, I will explore the ability of this unique theatrical form to dominate the European stage during the Renaissance through examining its adaptive qualities. The ability to integrate and develop directly from the situations of its audience established the genre as a symbol for both its native and international audience. Recognizing not only the acceptance of, but the attachment to and adaptation of commedia dell’arte characteristics by Italians and others creates an insight into the historical popularity of the genre as well as establishes a way in which modern practitioners can tap into the power and appeal of commedia dell'arte in today's theatre.

The Whats

We’ve composed new plays in our style,
And when you hear them delivered
You will nearly die with laughter,
They’re so brilliant, smart and witty.
- Anton Francesco Grazzini (Il Lasca),
Canto di Zanni e di Magnifici, (1559)

In its day, this art form was known as la commedia degli zanni (theatre/comedy of the servants\(^3\)) or la commedia all’improvviso (improvised theatre/comedy), evolving much later to its current fame as la commedia dell’arte\(^4\) (theatre/comedy of the professionals) (Scott 3). While the exact origins of the genre are under debate, the earliest extant document (for eight artisans forming an Italian professional troupe at Padua) shows that professional troupes were established and performing by the year

\(^3\) European studies usually define zanni as servants while American studies define it as buffoons.

\(^4\) The actual term, la commedia dell’arte, was not used until the eighteenth century when Carlo Goldoni used it to distinguish between the “masked and improvised drama from the scripted comedy of character” that he was initiating as a playwright (Richards 8).
Since, as previously mentioned, a knowledge of the “whats”, the characteristics and attributes of *commedia dell’arte*, is essential prior to a deeper investigation of the “whys”, I will start by detailing the defining characteristics of the genre. While I will explore many of these areas in more detail later on, the following outline will serve as the foundation from which my further discussion can build.

The two leading books in the “whats” of *commedia dell’arte* are Pierre Louis Duchartre’s *The Italian Comedy: The Improvisation Scenarios Lives Attributes Portraits and Masks of the Illustrious Characters of the Commedia dell’Arte* (1966, translation by Randolph T. Weaver) and Kenneth and Laura Richards’ *The Commedia dell’Arte: A Documentary History* (1990). Both of these works meticulously examine and present the “important aspects of…one of the most influential dramas of the older European theatre” (Richards xiii). Study of the genre is necessarily impacted by its unique documentation. As the performances of *commedia dell’arte* revolving around improvised scenarios instead of written scripts, the tangible archive lies in actors’ *zibaldoni* (notebooks), contemporary iconography, journals, and the official court records of the time, with an occasional written out dialogue from a performance. With the inability to study exact scripts containing detailed descriptions of setting and dialogue, the focus of the reconstruction of this genre revolves mostly around the description of the

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5 This document gives interesting insight into the concerns and needs of the professional acting troupes. The document binds the 8 players into a “fraternal company which should last until the first day of next Lent that will come in 1546, and which should commence in the octave of next Easter, together they have concluded and determined that in order that such a company shall survive in fraternal love until the above-mentioned time without any hatred, rancour and dissolution, to make and observe with love, as is customary among good and faithful companion, all the articles written hereunder which they promise to observe and abide by without cavil, under penalty and loss of the money written hereunder” (Cocco 57). The ensuing articles deal mostly with collective operation, establishing communal money and earnings, and direction under a single leader who instigated rehearsal schedules, traveling itineraries, and performance contracts.
“characteristics” of commedia dell’arte (the scenarios, the stock characters, the masks and the lazzī) and the popular troupes.

The performances were built around canovacci, or scenarios, that outlined the basic plotline of the story. Posted backstage, the canovacci were consulted by the actors at the start of each scene and led to improvised dialogue and play on stage. The plot lines pulled from familiar stories (from Italian drama and the Medieval and Renaissance novella) as well as immediate local life, playing heavily upon the conventions of love triangles, disguise, and mistaken identity. The absence of developed scripts pushed the emphasis of the performance from the text or subject to the troupe and performers. Due to the necessary skills of improvisation demanded by the use of the canovacci, actors of the period believed themselves to be of a higher caliber than the “normal” actor, as is shown in the following comments by Gherardi (a famous Arlecchino):

Anyone can learn a part and recite it on stage, but something else is required for Italian comedy. For a good Italian actor is a man of infinite resources and resourcefulness, a man who plays more from imagination than from memory; he matches his words and actions so perfectly with those of his colleague on the stage that he enters instantly into whatever acting and movements are required of him in such a manner as to give the impression that all that they do is prearranged. (qtd in Duchartre 32)

Actors, upon retirement, would often write and publish the canovacci that their troupes performed, with the two greatest extant collections belonging to Dominique Biancolelli and Flaminio Scala. Of both collections, the most study is given to Scala, with Luigi Riccoboni, a “reluctant actor and would-be reformer” and author of Histoire du théâtre
italian (1723) describing them as being “not so concise as those we use and hang upon the wall of the theatre behind the scenes; neither are they so prolix that the actor can obtain the least suggestion of dialogue from them. They explain only what the scene is about, what the actor is to do, and no more” (qtd in Duchartre 51). Every troupe possessed a repertory of canovacci that could be performed on a moments notice. These repertories were developed through their own process, inherited from former troupes or stolen from rivals.

The characters in the canovacci were drawn from four recognizable categories of stock figures: zanni (comic servants), innamorati (lovers), capitano (braggart soldier) and the vecchi (old men). The zanni were lower class servants, highly comical, with an amusing mixture of cunning and stupidity (usually lacking in intelligence but very street wise). While numerous in their adaptations, their names (Arlecchino, Pulcinella, Pedrolino, Columbina, etc.) usually contained the Italian diminutive “-ino/a”, which, when attached to the end of a name, gives a sense of smallness. The innarmorati (Flavio, Isabella, Oratio, Flaminia, etc.) were known as perfection embodied. They were witty, handsome/beautiful, well-educated but incredibly naïve. Their entire existence revolved around love (being in love, being loved in return) and the plot usually revolved around the obstacle to their love, with the zanni functioning as the way to overcome the impediment to their marriages.

The obstacles were usually found in the other two classes of characters. The capitano was a foreigner (usually Spanish – though played by a native Italian actor), whose existence was determined by his consistent need to show his importance. He recounted tales of his bravery in war and his seduction of women, but was actually a
coward at heart, shrieking and running off stage at the slightest hint of danger. He was often in love with the *innamorata*, the female lover, and would trick her father into engaging her to him. The fathers of the *innamorati* were the *vecchi*. Old and miserly, their concerns centered on the money (Pantalone) and their profession of knowledge (Dottore). They believed themselves to be quite the “ladies men”, and often would try to marry their young daughters off to each other.

The actors (with the exception of the *innamorati*) presented their characters with the help of close fitting leather half-masks, which emphasized and exaggerated different aspects of the upper face. The unique situation of playing within a mask is amplified by that fact that each character had a specific, recognizable mask that contained particular distortions (with the eyes, the nose, or any other feature). Legend has it that the character was actually transmitted by the mask from actor to actor. The belief was, therefore, that the actor did not play his own instincts, but instead did what the mask told him to do. As Jacques Copeau, a leading twentieth century French theatre artist states:

> The actor who performs under a mask receives from this…object the reality of his part. He is controlled by it and as to obey it unreservedly. Hardly has he put it on when he feels a new being flowing into himself, a being the existence of which he

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6 One reason for the lack of masks on the *innamorati* was due to the fact that, for the first time in Western theatre, women were on stage. Having a female on stage was a novelty and a draw to the audiences. Therefore, the females would remain unmasked in order to revel in their beauty. The male counterpoints were, consequently, also left unmasked as the point of the *innamorati*, both male and female, was, in fact, their beauty.

7 The value that I place in the legend was increased by an exercise performed in a *The Decameron* (2007) rehearsal. The adapter wrote in the use of masks to exaggerate the “ugliness” of a family being described, the Baronci. I brought in my *commedia dell’arte* masks, but neither trained the actors on the movements of the characters nor informed them on the name/type of mask that they had picked. The actors were given time to study the mask and in an exercise very similar to a traditional “putting on the mask”, asked to provide a physicality and personality that was supported by the mask (basically, I asked them to create the character that was inspired by the mask). Without fail, every single actor produced a character that resembled the original *commedia dell’arte* character whose mask they were wearing.
had before never suspected. It is not only his face that has changed, it is all his personality, it is the very nature of his reactions, so that he experiences emotions he could neither have felt nor feigned without its aid…[everything] will be dictated by this mask – the Latin ‘persona’ – a being, without life until he adopts it, which come from without to seize upon him and proceeds to substitute itself for him. (qtd in Nicoll 41)

The masks were literally the faces of the characters, and were instantly recognizable to both other actors and the audience. It also heightened the need for physicality and communication through the body since facial expressions could not be seen.

With the canovacci revolving around similar plot lines and using the same characters, the distinction between the plays and the popularity of the troupe with the audience was determined by the individual players. Actors became famous for their individual lazzì, stage tricks and business (both planned and unplanned) that are defined by Mel Gordon, in his book Lazzi: The Comic Routines of the Commedia dell’arte, as something “foolish, witty, or metaphorical in word or action”, usually revolving around acrobatics, tumbling, and beatings (4). Our knowledge of lazzì comes from autobiographies of actors, descriptions from audience members, and notations in the canovacci (sometimes consisting of only the title). Some examples are as follows:

- Lazzo of Catching a Flea: Arlecchino, twisting his body into impossible positions and bent backwards with his head between his

---

8 Due to the legend and the importance of masks in commedia dell’arte studies, the individuals are referred to as masks (the mask of Pantalone, the mask of Arlecchino) instead of characters. However, since this thesis talks specifically about the masks and the characters, the distinction will be kept in order to avoid confusion.
legs, catches an invisible flea. He celebrates his victory with a series of double back-springs.

- Lazzo of Spilling No Wine: Startled, Arlecchino, holding a full glass of wine, executes a complete backward somersault without spilling the wine.

- Lazzo of the Cuff: At the conclusion of an argument, Aurelia is hit by Flaminia, who exits. Pantalone, who happens to wander by at the moment, is struck by Aruelia, who then departs. Pantalone then beats the newly arrive Coviello, who in turn strikes Lelio, who beats Franceschina, who hits Zanni, the last arrival.

The *lazzi* were recorded in actors’ *zibaldoni* and were closely guarded within the troupes, passing from parent to child, in efforts to keep the audience’s returning to see their particular shows.

Each actor was specifically trained in one character, performing him/her throughout his/her life. Actors would band together in troupes, usually consisting of 10-12 performers. Three basic kinds of troupes existed. First was familial troupes, where many of the actors were from the same family, stemming either from intermarriage among the performers or with performing families starting their own troupe. These troupes would usually name themselves after the leading player, and the tradition would continue through the apprenticeship and training of their children. Second were court companies, formed specifically for a noble patronage, and consisting of leading players. Third were autonomous companies, with players entering into contracts with specific
theatres. Every necessity of performance would be supplied by troupe members, with Carlo Goldoni\(^9\) humorously describing an encounter with one of them as follows:

…the ensemble aboard ship was a droll spectacle to behold. There [are] a dozen people – as many actors as actresses – a prompter, a stage carpenter, a property-man, eight men-servants, four maids, nurses, children of all ages, dogs, cats, monkeys, parrots, birds, pigeons, a lamb – it was a Noah’s Ark. (*Memoirs* 16-17)

Troupes traveled, lived and performed together, creating an intimate knowledge and awareness of each other that allowed their unique style of performance to flourish.

While the troupes were numerous, two of the leading troupes of the Renaissance, or at least the ones who left the biggest impact on the records, were *Ganassa* and *I Gelosi*. *Ganassa* originated in Mantua in 1568 under leader Alberto Naseli (known on stage as Zan Ganassa). The troupe, after successfully performing for the Duke of Mantua, quickly rose in popularity. *Ganassa* is often credited as the first troupe to take *commedia dell’arte* into France, with the first trip to Paris in 1571, and as the first resident troupe in Spain (in the court of King Phillip II from 1572-1577) and Ganassa himself is the first documented actor to play Arlecchino. *I Gelosi* originated in Venice in 1576, and under the eventual direction of Flaminio Scala (1568) became known as one of the most unified *commedia dell’arte* troupes. Scala’s work on the presentation of characters, archiving of *canovacci*, and establishing more order with the improvisation was in efforts of following the creed on *I Gelosi*’s emblem, a two-faced Janus with the following inscription: “*Virtu, fama ed onor ne ser’ geolsi* (They were jealous of attaining virtue, fame, and honour)”. The subsequent direction under Francesco Andreini (1589)

\(^9\) Carlo Goldoni (1707-1793) was a playwright and theatre reformer from Venice. His role is *commedia dell’arte* history is marked by the famous Goldoni/Gozzi debate, where the two playwrights battled in their efforts to reform the Italian theatre.
increased their status among troupes, specifically due to the performance of his wife Isabella, a celebrated beauty.

Like most modern theatre companies, the livelihood of the *commedia dell’arte* troupes depended on finding an audience. From the beginning, the tradition of the troupes was to travel, either responding to an invitation to perform (usually by the local nobility), in anticipation of high monetary gain through a tour, or in looking for new audiences when the home economic situation was bleak (Richards 257). As Il Lasca declared in his song, *Canto carnascialesco dei Zanni* (*Carnival song of the servants*) (1562), “Performing the Zanni and the Pantalone, we go to every place and act the comedy which is our art.” The popular circuits within Italy included the main cities in the north and central parts (Florence, Bologna, Padua, Venice, Milan, Mantua and Genoa) though there is documentation of southern ventures into Naples and Sicily. However, circumstances and invitations due to growing popularity quickly pulled the troupes outside of Italy and into *l’estero*, the outside.

In looking at the international touring groups, the concentration has focused on the troupes in France, where the best records were kept. Virginia Scott’s exhaustive book, *The Commedia dell’Arte in Paris: 1644-1697* (1990), is the keystone work that goes in depth on the troupes that were performing, their relationship with the French nobility, and the attempts of the Italians to work in their own theatre. Kathleen Lea has also provided an insight into the influences of the traveling troupes in England with her two volume work, *Italian Popular Comedy: a study in the Commedia dell’arte, 1560-1620, with special reference to the English stage* (1962). Both of these works, along with
few isolated chapters in other books that focus on the international travels of the troupes, provide the necessary documentation of the “Whats” of the traveling troupes.

The first recorded account of a *commedia dell’arte* troupe outside of Italy is from Nordlingen (Germany) in 1549 (only 4 years after the first record in Italy), though individual characters (such as Pantalone in the Austrian court) were documented abroad as early as 1527. The “newness” of the theatre form, and their ability to quickly improvise and produce a play, caught the interest of the Dukes, and troupes began to receive invitations from all around the German states. Franz Rahut, who concentrates on the *commedia dell’arte* troupes in Bavaria, explains that the love of the genre revolved around:

...nell’intreccio e nell’imbroglio dell’azione, nelle situazioni che ne risultano, nei contrasti, nei tipi gia tradizionali, nelle parole (sopratutto nella diversita deli idiomi e nelle vanterie del capitano), nei gesti brutali, nell’acrobatismo, nei costume e nelle maschere (250-51)

…(in the weaving and the entanglements of the action, in the situations that they created, in the traditional types, in the words (above all in the diversity of the idioms and in the rantings of the captain), in the brutish gestures, in the acrobatics, in the costumes and in the masks)\(^{10}\)

The rising popularity of the genre resulted in a growing number of invitations and by the end of the sixteenth century, troupes had documented visits to many of the German states, France, Spain, the Low Countries and England, and continued to expand over the next

\(^{10}\) In this thesis, I provide all translations for documents and works shown in their original Italian.
two centuries into Scandinavia, Russia, and Poland, with iconography putting the troupes as far as Japan.

The Whys

“This evening a comedy was performed in the Italian manner all’improvviso, in the presence of all the most illustrious ladies, and notwithstanding that most who attended did not understand what was said, so accomplished and so delightful was the Venetian Magnifico, Messer Orlando di Lasso, together with his Zanni, that their jaws ached with laughter at all the antics.”
- Massimo Troiano da Napoli, Discorsi delli trionfi, giostre, apparati, (1568)

Having established a foundational knowledge of the characteristics that define the genre of commedia dell’arte, there is opportunity to examine the reasons behind the incredible popularity of the genre, both in native and foreign lands. The most groundbreaking attempt into the “Whys” is the first (and only) “multi-disciplinary study of the dissemination of Italian culture in northern Europe” (West i) entitled Italian Culture in Northern Europe in the Eighteenth Century (1999). Here, the writers look into the social, economic and political circumstances that influenced the flux of Italian artists into northern countries, and the subsequent introduction, integration and blending that occurred culturally. However, the writers and editors of that work focus mostly on the influence of Italian art and music. References to commedia dell’arte are limited and revolve almost solely around their time in France. It is my aim, in this thesis, to open a discussion into the neglected “Whys”, exploring the reasons of the international phenomenon that commedia dell’arte created.
In order to effectively realize the impact of *commedia dell’arte* at home and abroad, and grasp the significance of the genre in both locations, I will concentrate first on its original development and then examine its tours abroad. Chapter Two will specifically deal with the fragmented status of Italy and the resulting lack of national identity. I will examine the predominating ideologies of play and laughter that were shaping the needs of the society while allowing the specific, regional, satirical stock characters to establish themselves as symbols for the individual regions of the peninsula, while presenting a unified symbol of Italy to the north.

Chapter Three will look specifically at the internationally touring troupes. I will discuss the reaction and impressions of Northern Europe to its southern neighbor and the establishment of the Italian troupes as an exotic Other. I will also explore the popularity of the troupes through their unique ability to capitalize on the fascination of their foreign audiences while adapting to the demands of international performance in order to communicate successfully with their audiences.

Chapter Four will explore the adaptation and adoption of *commedia dell’arte* into Northern European theatre and culture. Through the examples of Ganassa and Bottarga in Spain, Punch in England and Pierrot in France, I will detail the process that countries went through to both integrate the standard Italian theatre into their own cultures as well as the changes made to specific characters to turn them into symbols of their own peoples and countries.

Chapter Five will connect the adaptive abilities of the troupes, and their resulting popularity, during the Renaissance with the work of modern practitioners (including my own work) who have integrated *commedia dell’arte* techniques into their theatre
productions. In looking at the specific characteristics of *commedia dell’arte* (audience interaction, stock characters, masks, and the training of the actor in physical theatre) and the ability of modern theatre artists to adapt and integrate them according to the spirit of commedia, I will explore the possible ramifications of the genre for today’s artists and audiences.

These ramifications, and ability of *commedia dell’arte* to resonate within the modern theatre, depend on the deeper study of why the genre amassed a large popularity both at home and abroad. Beyond the general acceptance that the genre delighted its audiences, providing lots of entertainment and laughter, the ability of practitioners to utilize the genre today demands a further discussion into the efficacy of the genre. *Commedia dell’arte*, with its unique performance style, survived (and thrived) due to its ability to adapt to its surroundings. By integrating the needs (including those beyond simple entertainment), lives and situations of the audience members through the alteration of storylines, performance styles and characters, *commedia dell’arte* was able to provide a connecting link to the people: to the troupes, to the characters, to each other and to their developing nations.
Chapter Two: Identity Crisis

“Such is the system of our improvised comedy, to which our nation only can lay claim”
- Carlo Gozzi, Memoirs, (1890)

While much debate has been given over to the origins\(^\text{11}\) of *commedia dell’arte*, there is a general consensus that by the sixteenth century, this particular theatre genre had come into its own. Within its native country, the golden age of commedia spread from 1550 to 1650, when it reached its “pinnacle of purity” (Fisher 7), with its specific characteristics (the “whats”) fully forming to the point of recognition and documentation.\(^\text{12}\) One area of particular recognition was the creation, definition and presentation of specific and consistent stock characters. As these characters were developed and given personal “historical backgrounds”, they quickly become associated with, and defined by, particular cities and regions. Within their development, emphasis was placed on the characters’ origins, with residents describing them as their city’s “illustrious son”, “brightest light”, and “eminent citizen.”

The emphasis on the origins of the characters (and the subsequent effect on the development of status, costuming, personality and speech) is particularly interesting in respect to the concurrent divided, war-torn state of Italy. The emergence of city-states during the Middle Ages, and the subsequent power struggles among ruling families,

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\(^\text{11}\) While there is evidence that points to specific points of development (coming directly out of the Atellan farce, developing from the ancient comedies of Plautus and Terrence, or being brought west by the Byzantine performers after the fall of Constantinople), I personally agree with the idea that *commedia dell’arte* “emerged from an amalgam of sources and the spirit and social conditions of the time” (Fisher 7).

\(^\text{12}\) The “golden age” is particularly well documented thanks to the previously mentioned collection of *canovacci* preserved by Flaminio Scala (1547-c1620).
resulted in a politically unstable atmosphere on the Italian peninsula and a lack of cohesiveness among the Italian people. As I will explain later on, the people who lived within the umbrella term, “Italians”, identified not with a larger national group, but with their individual regions or kingdoms: the Venetians, the Bolognese, the Neapolitans, the Bergamaschi and the many many others. With this lack of a cohesive national identity, the simultaneous development of staged portrayals that represented these individual societies encouraged a unique bond to form between audience and character, a bond that is remarkable due specifically to the type of representation being displayed. While sociological studies show that people desire to identity themselves through positive associations, the depictions of the *commedia dell’arte* characters usually highlighted and satirized the negative qualities of their fellow citizens and reinforced the worst part of their reputations. With the prevailing Renaissance ideology that embraced play and humor, the creation of these satirical and comedic masks provided a unifying symbol for the people. The integration of specific regional characteristics into individual characters highlighted the divided state of Italy, creating unique and individual symbols of the differing areas of the peninsula. By adapting specifically to the fragmented state of the people, while emphasizing the widespread value put on play, the *commedia dell’arte* troupes established a strong foundation on which rested their native popularity.

**Who am I?**

"Men can starve from a lack of self-realization as much as they can from a lack of bread."

- Richard Wright, (1908-1960)
Sociologists suggest that the desire to self-identify, to answer the questions “who am I?” and “what do I believe?”, is one of the most basic needs of mankind (Larsen et al 165). Social identity theory revolves around the idea that individuals define themselves in two dimensions: social, “defined by membership in various social groups” and personal “the idiosyncratic attributes that distinguish an individual from others” (Howard 369). While social and personal identity have been viewed as lying on the opposite ends of the spectrum, and having little effect on one another, current research by Kay Deaux, a distinguished professor of psychology at the Graduate Center, City University of New York, argues that “social and personal identity are fundamentally interrelated” and that positive personal identity is directly linked to positive social representation (5). One of the most common ways to create social identity is through a national or cultural sentiment, one that “refers to the feeling of home, and may include the search for kinship ‘roots’…and in particular serves the need to belong” (Larsen et al 166).

Nationalism is one of the most fundamental and emotional levels of constructing self-identity. The psychological position holds that:

…people identify with a nation because doing so satisfies basic social needs. Distinguishing between in-groups and out-groups permits an orientation to the world which reduces uncertainty (Cspeli, 1989). As a consequence, people develop a syndrome of attitudes and opinions with respect to other national groups. (Larsen et al 167)

The creation of a national identity, furthermore, creates a power among the citizens, as it unifies and directs their courses of action. The level of influence that national identity possess over those who embrace it establish it as one of most powerful types of
identification, being a leading cause of national unity as well as providing the “moral basis and rationale for behavior and action…National ideology and identity are fundamental anchors and frameworks not only for individual behavior but indeed for the nation-state” (Larsen et al 168).

The establishment of a national identity for the people of Italy during the Medieval and Renaissance was problematic. For centuries, their identity had been defined by their status as Roman citizens. In the Roman society, national identity, which connected directly to the Republic, was the prevailing and most important identity that a person could possess. The value of the individual and the worth of individualism were reduced in favor of uniformity under the State – the establishment and acknowledgment of their public persona as a Roman citizen. This status (and therefore the identity) was specifically measured by their ability to produce worthy deeds in harmony with the virtues that were the heart of the Via Romana, the Roman Way. The three prevailing virtues were Virtus (strength or courage – both physically, intellectually, and emotionally), Gravitas (a sense of seriousness, dignity and importance) and Pietas (a sense of duty – to others, the State, the gods, and to the family). Due to belief of interconnectivity, with every Roman citizen being directly linked to each other through their status, and the service required to gain that status, a citizen’s national identity could only be established and confirmed by others: family, friends, leaders, or any other Roman citizen. No Roman could be his own judge, but “could see himself only through the eyes of others” (Cavacci). A person would be judged by those around him according to his actions (both personally and to the State) and given the honor of being a “Roman”

13 This is in reference only to the ability to associate oneself with Rome. Actual citizen requirements revolved around birth, status and gender. I assert the right to make this distinction due to the fact that
if they adhered to the established virtues. The reputation of what it meant to be “Roman” spread throughout Europe as the boundaries of the Republic continued to expand.

The solidarity and positive representation of a Roman citizen reached its height during the Republic (509-27 BCE). The strength and supremacy of a Roman identity was solidified during the rule of the Empire (27 BCE-476 CE), though diminished in its positive reputation as the focus shifted from the display and development of the Roman virtues to acquirement of power and wealth, and the demonstration of such by living a decadent life. With the fall of the Empire (476 CE), and the subsequent division of lands and populaces, the people of the Italian peninsula lost the stability of their central ruling power and source of their national identity. The instability of their national sense was heightened by the continuous invasion of foreign powers, beginning in the fifth century.

Resisting the use of Italy as the battleground for the power struggle in Europe, local families began to vie for leadership over a contained area. Native dictators known as signori (later to take the royal title, principi, princes) fractioned the land into various city-states in an attempt to establish some sort of local political stability and independence. The reign of the signori emphasized familial rule, with the power of the dictatorship passed hereditarily. It also allowed for and created strong, powerful family units. The prevailing attitudes and rulings of these leaders is perhaps best described in Nicolo Machiavelli’s writings, Il Principe (The Prince) (1513) where, when defining their role and practices, he asks “whether it be better to be loved than feared or feared than loved? It may be answered that one should wish to be both, but, because it is

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women, while never afforded official citizen status under Roman law, could and would identify themselves as Romans.

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Examples of the strongest families are the Medicis in Florence, the Sforzas in Milan, and the Este family in Ferrara.
difficult to unite them in one person, is much safer to be feared than loved, when, of the
two, either must be dispensed with” (Chapter XVII).

As the larger centers of the city-states sought to expand their control and
influence through the absorption of the surrounding smaller communities, consistent wars
broke out among the leading powers. However, with the bringing in of mercenary
leaders (known as condotierri, contractors, due to their contracted fighting state), Italy
was once again left open to foreign intervention, and the invasion of Charles VIII of
France in 1494 marked the collapse of Italy’s political independence and the beginning of
foreign occupation that lasted until the nineteenth century, which continued to complicate
the growing schisms between Italian states. This political fragmentation led to a
consistent shift in boundaries and an inability to claim a constant heritage. The people, in
their fragmented state, lacked a source from which they could establish a unified identity.

With no unified country, or even consistent rulers or boundaries, the creation of a
national identity through connection to “Italy” and “Italians” was difficult. Heavy debate
ensued between the need for a “united province under imperial overlordship” and the
celebration and preservation of “the vital and distinct cultures of the city-states” (Najemy
3). The fifteenth century brought an attempt at expansion of territorial states into a
larger, unified ruling power, and the subsequent absorption of smaller cities into the
larger states. However, despite this integration and unification of larger areas, the people
tended to cling to a fierce sense of local pride and loyalty when dealing with laws,
religious practices, and civic developments (Najemy 4). With the failure of the political
arena to create a source or symbol from which people could (or desired to) establish a
strong “national” identity, another source was needed that could create a national
mindset. One of the major sources was the artistic community, specifically through the *commedia dell’arte* troupes. The unique development and presentation of this theatrical form provided what sociologists call an “aesthetic communion”, a source “through which people [could] achieve self-realization” and where the “national heritage which define[d] ‘who I am’ provided[d] the components of national identity” (Larsen et al 166-67).

The idea of theatre working as a cultural expression that helps construct and establish national identity is explored in S.E Wilmer’s book *Theatre, Society and the Nation: Staging American Identities* (2002). As an arena for presenting national history, folklore and myths, theatre also acts as a site for nurturing national ideology for two main reasons. First, due to its “rhetorical and semiotic features”, theatre has proven effective in communicating ideas of what is “national” and what is “alien”. Second, as theatre performs to the mass population, it can not only represent ideas of national ideology but gain immediate acceptance or rejection by the community at large (1). As Wilmer explains:

…the theatre can act as a public forum in which the audience scrutinizes and evaluates political rhetoric and assesses the validity of representations of national identity. The theatre can serve as a microcosm of the national community, passing judgment on images of itself. (2).

The conviction that theatre can serve as tool in the creation of national identity is not solely a modern idea. Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805), in discussing the state of his native Germany, argued that theatre could both establish national values as well as create a new German nation. He wrote:
If a single characteristic predominated in all of our plays; if all of our poets were in accord and were to form a firm alliance to work for this end; if their work were governed by strict selection...in a word, if we were to see the establishment of a national theatre: then we would become a nation...It would have a great influence on the national temper and mind by helping the nation to agree in opinions and inclinations. The stage alone can do this, because it commands all human knowledge, exhausts all positions, illumines all hearts, unites all classes, and makes its way to the heart and understanding by the most popular channels.

(Ungar 279)

Emerging as an accepted and popular national genre of theatre, commedia dell’arte is, due to its adaptive attributes, especially powerful in its abilities to fulfill theatre’s ability to create national identity. Continuing in its established work as a public form, addressing and reaffirming national ideology through its heightened and distinct interaction between audience and performer, commedia dell’arte is specifically unique in its presentation of that ideology due to its creation of city and region specific stock characters. The characters themselves provided a norm and constancy that people could attach themselves to and identify with due to their visual representation. The popularity of the genre, and its widespread performance, insured a consistent and familiar representation across the Italian peninsula and people. However, unlike the aforementioned stalwart reputations of the Roman society, the Italians, in their immersing mindsets and school of thought, instead choose to accept a form that was subversive and negative in its representations. With the focus on play, laughter and
satire, the exaggerated and ridiculous nature of *commedia dell’arte* appealed to the people while creating a symbol to which they willingly attached themselves.

**Carnival and Lent**

“*Because comedy consists in words and deeds [...] and because one speaks too with the actions of the entire body, the ridiculous can be created by action, with or without words.*

- Petrucci, *Dell’arte rappresentativa*, (1699)

Along with the political wars fought in the field, fifteenth century Europe was marked by the battle raging in the philosophical and ideological mindsets of the people. Mikhail Bahktin, in his focus on the popular culture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, summarizes the distinction between the two sides as follows:

…one that was the *official* life, monolithically serious and gloomy, subjugated to a strict hierarchical order, full of terror, dogmatism, reverence and piety; the other was the *life of the carnival square*, free and unrestricted, full of ambivalent laughter, blasphemy, the profanation of everything sacred, full of debasing and obscenities, familiar contact with everyone and everything. Both these lives were legitimate, but separated by strict temporal boundaries. (*Problems of Dostoevskii's Poetics* 129-30)

These two lives, the “official” and the “carnival square” evolved from the prevailing Catholic traditions and ideologies of Carnival and Lent. Literally, Carnival is defined as the period of celebration, debauchery, and pleasure that occurs in the two weeks before
Lent, a forty-day period of sacrifice, fasting and self-discipline. Ideologically, they are defined as warring ideals, “locked in an eternal contest… between passion and reason, appetite and intellect, pleasure and piety, excess and scarcity” (Findlen 246).

Carnival and Lent defined themselves through their co-existence, able to be only because of the other. However, despite their interdependency, during the Renaissance, the power of the ludic over its graver alternative was beginning to solidify, as illustrated through Peter Brueghel’s 1559 painting, *The Battle of Carnival and Lent*. Here, pale, thin and severe and Lent battles robust and carefree Carnival celebrators on the streets of an imaginary Flemish city.

Fig. 1 Peter Brueghel’s The Battle of Carnival and Lent, 1550
Brueghel’s painting brings to light the fact that, while the seriousness of Lent was needed in order to provide balance to Carnival, the developing Renaissance ideals supported the ludic. As explained by Johan Huizinga, author of *Homo ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, “the whole mental attitude of the Renaissance was one of play” (180). Reveling in this mindset, the people of Italy cultivated this attitude by nurturing and exploring “humanity’s first impulse” in as many areas as possible. With the serious nature of political instability and religious oppression, the people found connections between laughter, copiousness and materiality that allowed then to understand nature and humanity.

In a time seen as the “pinnacle of human playfulness” the creation of satirical and comedic *commedia dell’arte* characters opened up a new area of self-exploration and representation for the people. These exaggerated and outrageous staged portrayals represented what Bakhtin calls an “unofficial and subversive means of expression, a freedom in the midst of restrictions” (qtd in Findlen 249). One example of the satire is found in the *innamorati*. Born in as members of high society, their infatuations (around which the plots revolve) bring them low due to hopelessness. The *innamorati* existed in their own created world; a world where Love is everything. They were self-obsessed and selfish, being in love first with themselves, then with the idea of being in love, and finally with their actual beloveds. Their lack of grip on reality is shown through their stances and walks, where they allowed their hearts to control their actions. Parodying the dance masters used by the upper class, the *innamorati* lacked firm contact with the earth, and literally followed their hearts, leaning with a puffed out chest to the point of imbalance, resulting in teetering and fluttering around the stage, arms trailing behind, until they
almost reach their object of desire (usually the other lover), stopping before actually touching him/her. The *innamorati* had little to no physical contact with each other – and when they did touch, it produced a maximum effect.

The satire on the upper class and their love dealings is shown even more in the fact that the *innamorati* related exclusively to themselves. They took masochistic enjoyment in being separated from their beloved because it gave them opportunity to dramatize their situation through laments, messages, moaning and playing to the audience for sympathy. When actually having opportunity to meet their beloved, they had great difficulty in communicating with each other and found opportunity to be vexed so that they might have opportunity to be scorned in love (and forcing the other lover to proclaim even more love in efforts to win him/her back). This relationship is well-illustrated in the dialogue captured by Andrea Perrucci, in his work *Dell'arte rappresentativa, premeditate ed all' improvviso* (1699).

\[ \begin{align*} 
\text{HE: You deceived me!} \\
\text{SHE: You betrayed me!} \\
\text{HE: So leave at once!} \\
\text{SHE: So be off with you!} \\
\text{HE: Yet, when I try to go…} \\
\text{SHE: Yet, when I make to go home…} \\
\text{HE: …what spell holds me back?} \\
\text{SHE: …what unknown force prevents me?} \\
\text{HE: Your sorcery is too strong for me!} \\
\text{SHE: Your hypnotic power is too great for me!} 
\end{align*} \]
HE: Fickle hope delude me…

SHE: Your handsomeness persuades me…

HE:….to find you faithful.

SHE:….not to find you guilty.

HE: You lie, for I never was!

SHE: You are wrong, for I protest I always was.

HE: And your love for other men?

SHE: And your penchant for other women?

HE: You have been deceived!

SHE: You have been misled!

HE: I do like you.

SHE: I do find you pleasing.

HE: I adore you.

SHE: I idolize you.

HE: My hope.

SHE: My love.

HE: My life.

SHE: My blessing.

HE: My light.

SHE: Breath of my life.

HE: My goddess.

SHE: My idol. (qtd in Rudlin, Commedia dell’arte 114-115).
These, and other, types of characters helped create a separate world, one that Bahktin describes as a boundless world “of humorous forms and manifestations [that] opposed the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal cultures” that the people were searching for (Rabelais and His World 4). These created worlds “liberat[ed] [them] from the fear that developed in man during thousands of years: fear of the sacred, of prohibitions, of the past, of power (Rabelais and His World 94).

Commedia dell’arte, with characters that existed in an exaggerated version of reality, not only created this type of hyper-world, but was fundamentally bound to it for its survival. The creation of this hyper-world, and the dependence of commedia dell’arte on exaggeration, play and laughter responded directly to the ideology of the scholars and the people, who celebrated paradoxes, elaborate jokes, enigmas and witticism as the preferred mode of expression. Desiderius Erasmus, a contemporary theologian, declared in his Colloquies (c. 1500), that “I’m not sure anything is learned better than when it is learned as a game” (94). Playing and gaming was regarded as an important feature of “the Renaissance tradition of serio ludere (playing seriously), which viewed play as a divine activity” (Findlen 255). God was viewed as a playful creator and the practice of play was seen as a divine art that God bestowed upon man. Artistry became a method of playful expression through which God would reveal the pattern of the universe. Humanity’s understanding of and participation in the game, and in art, was seen as a way to approach deity and share in divine wisdom. Having a God that was approachable and knowable through play, added to the accepted idea that jokes, paradoxes, and even parody were the most advantageous way of learning. The use of satire by the commedia dell’arte troupes and the highly negative portrayals and representations of the Italian
people were, therefore, actually the optimal way for the citizens to connect and identify with the characters, and bringing that identity to themselves.

With the lack of political stability and definition, the symbol and designation of who was an “Italian” remained consistently in question, with the people lacking a standard that defined the qualities and characteristics of their national identity. The increased focus on play and laughter, and the belief that learning and understanding was attainable through humorous and artistic means, allowed the people to look towards the aesthetic arena to provide a new, unifying national symbol. This symbol would allow them to reach a “self-realization” while responding to the “universal human need to belong and to be secure” (Larsen et al 166). The creation of *commedia dell’arte*, with its highly satirical and playful nature, provided a new, highly visible, art form that, through its specific and overt local ties, offered a connecting symbol across the people of the Italy. However, realizing the distinct and fierce loyalties that were developing among the individual city-states, *commedia dell’arte* troupes adapted their art to best relate to their audiences, developing region specific stock characters and putting an increased emphasis on their origins through their reputations, characteristics, visual representation and linguistics. These characters, highly satirical in nature, captured the playful ideology of the people, appealing to their lively nature, while offering a solid and consistent visual representation with whom they could identify themselves.

**Creating Regional Symbols**

“...and running over the different districts of Italy, they took the fathers from Venice and Bologna, the servants from Bergamo, and
The emerging stock characters, or recognizable types, followed the pattern that had been established in the ancient Greek and Roman comedies: the old miserly father, the educated scholar, the lovers, the crazy servants. However, the actors worked on evolving the characters beyond their ancient predecessor and, according to Duchartre, they “came into being” with the development of *commedia dell’arte*, “created by a welding of humanism and direct observation.” He says:

The new characters not only became heir to the traditions of the theatre of antiquity, tracing their descent from classic prototypes, but they possessed striking traits which stamped them with distinct personalities of their own. They had, for instance, their own manner of speaking and gesturing, their own peculiar intonations and dress, and they were individuals; even to their warts and moles. In short, they represented people not of the dead and forgotten past, but of the living and growing cities like Venice and Bergamo. (19)

This “welding of humanism and direct observation” contributed to more than just a familiar stereotype put on stage, but instead led to the creation of uniquely situated, region specific, yet universally recognizable characters that became symbols that served the social identification process.

The characters, in their specificity and continuous representation, created what is called “Group Schemas.” These Schemas (what are often called stereotypes) include “organized information about social positions and stratification statuses, such as gender, race, age and class” (Howard 368). These distinctions and information are important to
individuals as the occupation of social positions has a direct impact on a person’s sense of self and results in the Group Schemas playing a large part in an individual’s process of identification. Acting as Schemas, the characters provided the people a consistent representation that became symbolic of certain areas of Italy – a representation that they could see, identify and interact with while it was presented on stage. As characters remained consistent in dress, personality, status and action despite the changing of troupes and canovacci, they provided figures to whom the people could attach symbolic meaning. This meaning was then transmitted through interaction, both with the actors and with each other. These meanings (such as defining their status or establishing inherent vices and virtues according to those of the character) become part of their process of self-identification, a “strategic social construction created through interaction, with social and material consequences” (Howard 371). As the characters established themselves both within their home region and in outside communities, they codified among their audiences the unique identities of the different areas of Italy, while establishing an overall idea of “Italy” through working together in a unified performance.

The use of actual masks to distinguish the different characters assisted in establishing the characters as symbols, as well as uniquely “Italian”\textsuperscript{15}. While the use of masks in theatrical performance grew out of the classical tradition, commedia dell’arte was the only Western theatrical tradition to continuously use the convention, and

\textsuperscript{15}This idea is supported by the fact that the Italian people often wore masks in public. A tradition beginning in the thirteenth century, masks were often worn by the rich and famous (to show their prosperity, superiority and extravagance, while allowing them anonymity in their intrigues), as well as by courtesans and others who were in need of the utmost level of discretions and privacy. In Venice, the public use of masks was banned in the fourteenth century due to the increase of corruption, crime and immorality. The ban, however, excluded carnival and festival occasions, resulting in the both members of the audience and the troupe being masked during a performance.
establish consistent and specific rules of representation. Masks were used from the beginning, and with the traditional open-air style of performance, the mask became the most “dynamic and clearest way of giving identity to the character” (Rudlin, *Commedia dell’arte* 13). The mask became part of the total image of the character, which “comprised not only costume, make-up and hand props, but also the way the character spoke, moved and reacted. Because of these attributes, the Mask would be instantly recognized on entry, no matter in what play, or what actor was playing the role, and his comic reactions to the scene predicted” (Rudlin, *Commedia dell’arte* 13). With the identity of the character being continuously and absolutely defined through the mask, the characters became even more distinct in their representation.

The different and unique masks helped solidify the fact that the emerging “Italian” theatre was not only highlighting, but embracing the diversity of the people and their unique cultural development in different parts of the country. In solidifying the specific characters, the stories that evolved involved a birthplace and the reputation of the region or city that the characters were from was integrated into the way the character was developed. Some of the more famous characters built their entire characterization around their city of origin.

*Arlecchino*

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16 The strong and continued commitment to the unique and diverse cultures that emerged during this time in Italian history is exemplified by my time living in Sardegna, one of Italy’s two large islands located on the west coast. The native people are insulted when called “Italian”, choosing to recognize themselves as “Sardos”, and distinguishing themselves from the “people of the continent”. This cultural pride has led to a continuous instruction in Sardo dress, music, dance, food and dialect (with standard Italian being taught as a second language). The issue of dialects and the “Italian” language will be explored later in this chapter.
Arlecchino (also identified as Harlequin) has been heralded as one of the most famous, popular and influential *commedia dell’arte* character. A second zanni\(^{17}\) character, he was the servant, and subsequently the confident, of the principle male character. He was “sometimes a rascal, sometimes a dunce, oftenest a complete mixture of the two, almost always the chief plot-weaver, his main function was to rouse laughter, to entertain at all costs” (Smith 10). He was easily identifiable by his patchwork, multi-colored costume (which eventually developed into the more famous diamonds), as well as by specific physical characteristics. He excelled in “agility and acrobatics

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\(^{17}\) The *zanni* were divided into first and second zanni. First zanni, such as Brighella, were known as the crafty servants. Second zanni were the lowest on the social status level and considered the “stupidest” of the characters.
and...no one of his exponents could succeed unless he possessed at least a fair measure of suppleness of body” (Nicoll 70). In the period publication, *Calendrier historique des theatres* (1751), the character was described as:

…an ignorant valet, fundamentally naïve, but nevertheless making every effort to be intelligent, even to the extent of seeming malicious. He is a glutton and a poltroon, but faithful and energetic. Through motives of fear or cupidity he is always ready to undertake any sort of rascality and deceit. He is a chameleon which takes on every colour. He must excel in impromptu, and the first thing that a public always asks of a new Harlequin is that he be agile, and that he jump well, dance, and turn somersaults. (qtd in Duchartre 133)

This beloved, mischievous character was a constant since its debut, and the popularity of many troupes depended on the versatility, achievement, and reputation of the actor who played that part.

Along with these traits, Arlecchino was also a proud Bergamasco, hailing from the city of Bergamo. More specifically, he was a native of *citta bassa*, the lower city, which had a reputation of producing “nothing but fools and dullards” in its citizens (Duchartre 124). With the development of this character, and his professed love for his

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18 Bergamo is located about 25 miles/40 km northeast of Milan, and was a part of that kingdom until 1428 when it was switched to Venetian control. Thomas Corvat, an Englishman that walked from England to Venice in 1608, describes it as follows in his journals: "It standeth on the side of a hill, having in the east and south the pleasant plain of Lombardy before it. So that from many places of this city there is as sweet a prospect as any place in Italy doth yield" (Morris).

19 Bergamo is divided into two parts: *citta alta* (the upper city) which is known as the historical center and surrounded by fortress walls and *citta bassa* (the lower city) which was developed later, and where the current main city is found.

20 This reputation continues to modern day, with the natives of Bergamo being looked down upon as the “least” of the Northern Italians.
heritage, this “prince of numskulls”, was heralded as one of Bergamo’s most influential citizens, and led others to Bergamo in search for his influence among the people.

Goldoni discussed his own journey in his memoirs:

While going through Harlequin’s country I watched everywhere for some trace of this comic character who is the delight of the Italian theatre…[there I saw] the hare-scuts with which the peasants of that district still decorate their hats. (118)

This hare-scut, or animal tail was the traditional adornment on Arlechinno’s torque, which Maruice Sand, author and illustrator of *Masques et Bouffons* (1862), labeled as “another tradition from antiquity”. A fox’s brush or a hare’s ears were attached to “anyone who was the butt of ridicule” (Duchartre 135). Whether the people of Bergamo wore the tails in order to honor Arlecchino or if Arlecchino wore it according to the tradition of his homeland is unclear, but either way, that particular costume piece continuously reinforced the connection between the residents and the character.

Arlecchino was symbolic of the people of Bergamo not only in dress and reputation, but in status. Shown as a member of the lowest class, Arlecchino demonstrated the exiled state of the Bergamasco peasants who had been forced to immigrate to the ruling big city due to the wars and agricultural crisis in order to ward off financial ruin and starvation (Henke 23). His status as a servant to the Venetian master, Pantalone, also reinforced the stark contrast between the high and low ends of the spectrum in Italian society. However, while beaten\(^2\), verbally abused, and laughed at due to his stupidity and carelessness, Arlecchino was most often the character that solved

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\(^2\) One of the most famous, and most commonly used, *lazzi* was the beating of Arlecchino. Whenever the actors felt that their audience was not engaged with, or being entertained by, the actions on stage, one character would grab the slapstick and start hitting Arlecchino until the audience started laughing. Once the audience was happy, the slapstick would be put down and the action of the performance resumed.
the main conflict and “saved the day” (though more often than not, the solution would come incidentally through his actions instead of through actual cunning or planning). His ability to survive and thrive under his circumstances, no matter how bleak, spoke of the resilience and potential of his native people.

Pantalone

While Arlecchino portrayed the survival and uniqueness of the people of Bergamo, his master Pantalone highlighted the condition of one of the strongest and greatest republic in Italy. Venice, during the Renaissance, was at its height. A merchant empire, its position in the trade routes led to the citizens enjoying an unprecedented level of prosperity and influence. However, the prosperity brought with it a reputation for being the seat of vice, greed and decadence. Paola Bagnatori, managing director of the Museo Italo Americano in San Francisco, states that "Venice was in its splendor. It was so powerful, so rich, and yet so corrupt" (Viegas). Pantalone was the epitome of this society, and his origins were irrefutable with his traditional Venetian costume of tight fitting, long red trousers, tights, or breeches, red waistcoat, and a long loose black coat and skullcap.

The character of Pantalone was the miserly old man. Having given his life over to the pursuit of money, he now had two goals: the protection (and continued increase) of his fortune, and his lustful desires. The character was the highest in status, signified to

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22 The reputation of Venice is exceptionally shown in Ben Jonson’s play *Volpone*. Set in seventeenth century Venice, the plot revolves around Volpone, a Venetian nobleman. Volpone is extremely wealthy, gaining his fortune through dishonest means and spending it as extravagantly as possible. However, while Volpone is a crooked con man the opening of the show, trained in the arts of trickery and seduction from (and indeed, every Venetian in the play acts deceitfully), the corrupting power of Venice is best shown in the Sir Politic Would-be subplot. An English knight, Sir Politic decides to “go Venetian” – and turns into a lying would-be thief.
the audience by his consistent placement at the top of the \textit{dramatis personae}, and the fact that almost every extant \textit{canovaccio} begins with his entrance. However, his status level is compromised by his characteristics, normally described as follows:

A rich and miserly old merchant, always decrepit and stumbling. He limps and groans, he coughs and sneezes and continually blows his nose, or else is plagued with stomach-ache. Self-assured as he is, he is yet always being led by the nose. He thinks himself cleverer than anybody else, but at every step he becomes the butt for every conceivable kind of trick. Despite his age and decrepitude he
makes advances to the women. Although he is always rejected as an incorrigible suitor. (Djivelegov 100)

The long hooked nose of his mask indicates the fact that he leads his life according to his phallus instead of his brain, and his position as the obstacle of the lovers’ ability to marry set him up as the character that would be tricked and deceived into being defeated.

While the characteristics of Pantalone were exaggerated to a level of disrespectability, the citizens of Venice embraced the figure, delighting in “not only mak[ing] sport of all the peculiarities he already had, but attribut[ing] to him as many more as they could think of” (Duchartre 180). Even his name was satirical, originally derived from *pianta leone* (to plant the lion) in reference the Venetian “pioneer of trade who planted the ensign of San Marco, the winged lion, in Eastern countries conquered by the Crusaders who had sailed under the Venetian flag, in Venetian ships, to subdue the infidels and open new marts for European trade” (Kennard 312). However, while they were able to find humor in this irreverent jibe at the early Venetian merchants who were possessed with their passion to increase their wealth, Pantalone also served as a symbol that reiterated the significance of the Venetian Republic, their status in the eyes of Europe and their self-proclaimed supremacy.23

*Dottore*

Dottore’s sidekick, and lone friend, was found in the character of Dottore.

Dottore was an old, bumbling, conceited, licentious and often miserly self-proclaimed

23 The continued degeneration of the Pantalone mask, and its extreme popularity, did not sit well with all Venetians. Goldoni (a Venetian by heritage), in his reform, specifically attacked the mask of Pantalone, transforming him into a respectable, caring, citizen and father figure, in an attempt to alter the reputation of Venice abroad.
scholar. Legend proclaimed that “instead of wailing like an ordinary infant, his first utterance was a fine Latin quotation, slightly mutilated” (Duchartre 196). A member of every Academy, he found delight in giving his opinion on every subject, whether he had any knowledge of it or not. Dressed in the traditional academic costume, a “decorous black garb, with short cloak and doctoral bonnet, white ruff or collar, a pair of gloves in his hand and a handkerchief tucked into his belt”, he seldom helped in moving along the plot, but instead wandered ineffectually in and out, always continually talking (Nicoll 56).

Dottore hailed from Bologna, the established university town. The home of the oldest university in Europe, Il Studio (The Study), founded in 1088, it was often called
“Bologna the learned”, and was a huge draw to scholars, writers and artists. Due to this reputation, Dottore’s learned state was actually attributed less to his own studies and more with the air of Bologna, “saturated as it was with the knowledge emanating from so many colleges of foreign nations and grave professors dilating upon ‘men and things’ as they passed along the streets of the town” (Duchartre 196). However, despite his professions of knowledge, the comedy came from the fact that his intelligence was either usually useless, wrong, or garbled (or all three). A popular French verse from the day maintained the fact that:

Quand le docteur parle, l’on doute  
Si c’est latin ou bas-breton,  
Et souvent celui qui l’écoute  
L’interrompt à coups de baton.

(When the Doctor speaks, one cannot tell  
Whether it is Latin or Low-Breton  
And often his auditor  
Interrupts him with a thrashing.) (qtd in Duchartre 196)

Dottore would often speak in *non sequiturs*, and his *lazzi* revolved around misdiagnosis and the belief that he has discovered some (usually very well-known) fact. Despite his ineptitude as a scholar, the citizens of Bologna maintained their ties with Dottore as his scholastic abilities, however ineffective, reiterated Bologna’s growing reputation as a prominent town of learning.
While northern Italy continued to gain its reputation of scholastic achievement, industry and prestige, the southern agrarian society was struggling with its own issues. Economically weaker than the north, it was also the seat of a hotly contested ownership debate between France and Spain, both of which had a substantial influence in the development of southern society. This duality would manifest itself in the mask of Pulcinella. Pulcinella was the only commedia dell’arte character who was directly descended and evolved from two ancient Roman characters, Maccus and Bucco, known as his two “fathers”, who, as the pivots of Atellan art, were themselves polar opposites. Maccus was “quick, witty, impertinent, ironical and a bit cruel”, while Bucco was “self-sufficient, fawning, silly, timid, boastful, and, in short, a thief” (Duchartre 208). In all aspects of his character Pulcinella was torn and pulled by these two opposites, and led to an evolution of a character that could never be trusted. He is described as being “either stupid pretending to be clever, or clever pretending to be stupid, either way, he is always pretending and self-centered” (Rudlin Commedia dell’arte 141) and overall “there is not a single good trait in him; his cunning is low, he is always outdone when he meets a person of sense, so that in the end he is generally discovered, imprisoned, whipped, and hanged” (Smith 204).

Pulcinella came from Naples, and grew out of the common man of that kingdom. His dress represented the Acceran peasantry, with his loose and flowing white blouse caught by a heavy leather belt and wide and flowing white pantaloons and a large conical hat. He represented the poor worker, and was as diverse in his representations as his

24 Accera is located about 9 miles/20 km northeast of Naples, and is considered one of the oldest established civilizations in Italy.
character duality allowed. His speech was low and vulgar, carried out in a stupid wit. His inconsistency in character representation argues the fact that the audiences in Naples seemed to not be interested in character development. Rather, they “delighted in listening to the gross blunderings and crude comparison uttered in a diversity of circumstances, and never worried although one day Pulcinella came forward as a cowardly credulous fool and the next as a bold, vicious and successful rogue” (Nicoll 87).

Having little to lose, and completely shedding the politeness usually reserved for society, he was instead a “characterless dummy which could be dressed up in any way a particular actor – or a particular public – desired” (Nicoll 87). In this way he was able to
be claimed by the Neapolitan audiences to be the very symbol of Naples’ spirit. In fact, a writer in 1860 observed: “Only thirty years ago there was not a single individual in Naples who did not have a touch of Pulcinella somewhere in his character” (qtd in Duchartre 214). Though stupid, mean, lazy, and demonstrating the worst characteristics of mankind, Pulcinella became highly acclaimed and had such a high popularity in his own hometown that there were scarcely any plays performed where he did not play some role, either alive or dead.

This depiction of the characteristics of these four characters explores only the beginning of the highly satirical, exaggerated, and negative stereotypes that were being conveyed by all of the *commedia dell’arte* characters. With their detailed, specific regional characteristics (highlighted through their costuming, status, professions and reputations) these characters became symbols of the unique and diverse populations that were emerging out of the different city-states. With the prevailing Carnival mindset, the satirical nature of the depictions, and the ubiquitous use of humor and laughter, allowed the characters to endear themselves to the audience while still providing a tangible and visual definition of their heritage and their regional identity. The audience, through the performance process and presentation of these characters, had the opportunity to reject or accept the representations of themselves. Through their acceptance, the troupes continued to spread a national, satirical ideology, creating an idea of “Italy” that spread around the peninsula. However, the strength of the connection between character and audience was not due to simple visual representation. The troupes, responding even further to the conditions and lives of their audience members, were able to create a more
intimate relationship by integrating the widespread development of local dialects into their performances.

Dialects

“The first servant or Zanni...is usually done in Milanese, Bergamask, Neapolitan, Sicilian, or in other manners which imply ingenuity – Neapolitans and Bergamasks both being particularly noted for the astuteness and absurdity of their rough speech, and for the craftiness of their dealings.”
- Petrucci, Dell’arte rappresentative, (1699)

With Italy being continually exposed to the influence of foreign powers, as well as the isolation inherent in the separation of the city-states, the consequences resulted in the diversifying of the language. While Latin (at this time described as a Vulgar Latin) was still used as the proper and formal language for all the city-states, the common people began to develop hundreds of regional dialects. These dialects ranged from close to completely non-understandable from one region to the next. The following sentences show the differences between one dialect, Genovese, and modern-day Italian (derived from the Florentine dialect).

Genovese: Scurbi e sciuscia non se peu.

Italian: Bere e soffiare non si puo’.

25 When Dante wrote his La Commedia Divina, he wrote in his local Florentine dialect. The popularity of his work, and the concentrated work of scholars such Alessandro Mazzoni, to unify the language of Italy resulted in a close form of the Florentine being accepted as modern day Italian. Therefore, using the term “dialects of Italian” is actually incorrect, since the dialects evolved with the Latin, and Italian evolved from the dialects (Maiden and Perry 2).
Drink and suffer you cannot.

Figeu vani cianin cianin.

Ragazzo vai piano piano.

Boy, slow down. 26

This phenomenon of language was integrated into the *commedia dell’arte* characters that were being developed. Antonio Fava, a current international commedia master, explains that “every character was speaking in its own dialect, which was justified by the divided situation of the country…this is why each character comes from a certain region or city” (Fava). In performance, each character would speak and perform in the dialect that suited its point of origin: Arlecchino spoke in Bergamasco, Pantalone in Venetian, Dottore in Bolognese, Pulcinella in Napolitano, and the other characters in their local dialect. This distinction not only allowed a creation and establishment of immediate identity to the audience of where the mask originated, but allowed for further comedy across linguistic lines. Tristano Martinelli, the most celebrated of the early Arlecchinos, exemplified this in his personal collection of letters, lazzis, and repertory. There he demonstrated one of the songs he would perform, written in Arlecchino’s Bergamasco:

Ie me suis insomniato ce matin,

Qu’un fachin d’importanza

Me tiroit par la panza

Et mi disoit, Monseijur Arlequin,

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26 The Genovese phrases and their Italian translations are provided by Lisa Cagnacci, a local Genovese. I provided the English translations.
(I dreamed this morning
That an important-looking scoundrel
Seized me by the paunch
And said to me. Mr. Harlequin
You shall have a medal and chain.
I answered while still asleep
If I am not deceived
May it please God
To show us the ripe fruit
Of these splendid hopes.
By my faith
In my dreaming of my gain
I speak Tuscan.) (qtd in Duchartre 128)
In asking for a sign to verify his riches, Arlecchino receives it when he begins to speak in the Tuscan dialect, considered a high society language (and the language of the innamorati), instead of his lower class Bergamasco.

Along with the comedy, the use of dialects allowed the local people to connect even further with their “native son”. As some of the dialects evolved in a manner that was unintelligible to other regions, characters could execute jokes, lines and even scenes that would resonate only with their native population. In his own writings, Goethe described the following:

Pulcinella is, in fact, a sort of living newspaper. Everything that has happened in Naples during the day may be heard from him in the evening. However these local allusions, combined with his low popular dialect, make it almost impossible for foreigners to understand him. (440)

The jokes and reference were for the Neapolitan audience only, creating an “inside connection” that would have been impossible to create throughout any other means, as it was the only way to create a level of understanding that was restricted to a smaller group. This connection, which was strengthened through the continued, prevalent use of dialects in performance, effectively linked local populations with “their” character.

While based in the prototypes established in ancient Roman comedy, the evolution and development of the commedia dell’arte stock characters directly served the fragmented and divided audience for which it played. By establishing origins to the characters, and overtly pushing their heritage through the integration of local dress, reputation, status and dialect, these descendents emerged as unique and specific symbols, representing the different parts of the Italian peninsula. By adapting to the regional
differences and embracing the prevailing playful attitude of the Renaissance through highly satirical representations, *commedia dell’arte* created an aesthetic arena that, by connecting audience to characters, created a source of self-realization and definition for the people – a symbol of who they were.

However, while creating regionally this strong sense of identity and ownership, the integration of local cultures and characters on one stage, and the presentation of the unified troupes around the peninsula and abroad, worked to establish an overall national sense of “Italy” as *commedia dell’arte* emerged as, and was recognized as, the “Italian” genre of theatre. This recognition as the national genre of theatre, while providing strong evidence of its native popularity, also opened doors for *commedia dell’arte* troupes abroad by presenting a unified façade of Italian culture and society. Continuing with their practice of adapting to the situations of the audience, while taking advantage of their position abroad as a unique and “different” type of theatre, the *commedia dell’arte* was able to expand its reputation and popularity, turning into an international theatrical phenomenon.
Chapter Three: L’Italianata

“I saw the Italian Scaramucchio act before the King at Whitehall, people giving money to come in, which was very scandalous, and never so before at Court-diversions. Having seen him act before in Italy many years past, I was not averse from seeing the most excellent of that kind of folly.”

- Letter describing Tiberio Fiorilli in London, (29 September 1675)

The first documentation of a commedia dell’arte troupe outside of Italy was in 1549, in the German city Nördlingen. Over the next few decades, performances were recorded around Europe (especially Germany, Austria, France, England and Spain) and the society of Europe began to express their delight in seeing the troupes, and spreading the word to their leaders. In March of 1571, Lord Buckhurst, special ambassador to Charles IX, wrote the following to his Queen Elizabeth:

The 4 of this month the King procures the duke of Nevers to invite me to diner where we found a sumptuous feste and of gret honour adorned with musik of a most excellent and straunge conserte, and with a Comedie of Italians that for the good mirth and handling therof deserved singular comendacion. (Calendar of State Papers 413, original spelling)

As the reputation of the commedia dell’arte performances continued to spread through couriers and word of mouth, troupes gained access to a new audience: an audience that was decidedly outside the cultural in which the genre formed. However, despite the cultural, racial and linguistic barriers that were inherent in playing to a foreign audience, the popularity of the troupes continued to increase. Capitalizing on the fascination that
Europe held for all things *italianta*, the troupes gained acceptance and affection through their inherent, and keenly developed, ability to adapt their performances in order to fulfill the needs of their foreign audiences.

The continuous invasions and political warfare that carved and divided the Italian peninsula also served to break down the barriers of understanding that had previously defined the relationship between Italy and the rest of Europe. While considerable sharing of ideas (economic, political, intellectual and religious) had been the norm, there had been little comprehension and acceptance between countries and cultures (Jensen 261). Due to its position on the other side of the Alps, one of the greatest mountain chains in Europe that runs completely across the northern Italian boarder (through France, Switzerland, Austria, and Slovenia), Italy had been continuously and effectively separated geographically from all of its neighbors. However, in addition to creating a literal wall between countries, the Alps had also signified an ideological boundary, allowing the development of different mindsets that had just as efficiently separated Italy from “Northern Europe”\(^ {27} \). For the Italians, they marked the break between civilization and barbarity, while for the northern Europeans, the division between virtue and vice. With the steady crossing of European armies (and people) onto the Italian peninsula during the fifteenth century, and the consequential exposure of Italian Renaissance thought, the barrier between Italy and the north began to crumble.

\(^ {27} \) This separation between Italy and Northern Europe is continued in current European Renaissance Studies, where, in general studies, the greatest concentration is on Italy and the “rest” of Europe is given cursory attention.
Il Rinasciamento (Renaissance) thought and movement originated in Italy (c1350). The calamitous fourteenth century had been marked with the ravaging of the Black Death (which killed off more than one-third of the population), the resulting crises of Christian faith, war and political disorder, and economic depression (Jensen 3). The outcome was a re-examination of ideas, politics, outlooks, society and the arts that was influenced by an increasing awareness and regard for humanity. In fact, contemporary Italian sources continuously used the term *renovatio* (renewal) during this time to indicate a “distinct consciousness of having survived a holocaust…of rebuilding…[and] to characterize this period of physical and emotional recuperation” (Jensen 3). The Renaissance, as indicated by its literal translation\(^\text{29}\), was a time of “re-birth”.

This rebirth of Italian thought served to separate the Italian people from the North even further, creating a movement that would spark the interest and attention of all Northern European countries. The Renaissance prompted an examination that began to alter the very foundations of the lives of the people. The Medieval period had functioned under a feudal system, with a well-established social system and class distinctions. Families lived in self-sufficient agricultural societies known as manors, with the peasant class working the land in exchange for the protection of the noble owner. Spiritual guidance depended on the local clergy who exercised considerable influence and the

\(\text{28} \) Attaching a date to the Renaissance thought movement is obviously difficult, and widely varies within this particular field of study. For the purpose of this thesis, I am going by the assumed ending dates of the Plague, which many accept as a triggering factor in the shift of the ideological mindset. However, I recognize that there are events and occasions that occurred both before and after this date that were influential in the development of this era.

\(\text{29} \) The Italian translation of the word Renaissance is *Rinasciamento*. The root word, *nascere*, means “to birth”, and the prefix *ri-*, means “again”. The literal translation of the word then, into English, is “to birth again” or “a re-birth”.

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entire society depended on the established interdependence between classes. Manors existed independently of one another, able to provide for all the needs of its inhabitants.

The increased awareness of the surrounding world that marked the beginning of Renaissance thought was emphasized through the development of trade (with a specific focus on the waterways) and urban industry. The increase of trade was accompanied by a shift towards urban life, with a rapid population influx into towns and cities. The extension of commerce created new levels to society (with the level of merchants and entrepreneurs playing a vital role) which increased not only the amount, but the fluidity of wealth in Europe. Governments began to develop towards the establishments of city-states, independent, self-governing regions, with an overall rule of a prince and the consolidation of territorial power. The focus on trade also encouraged capitalistic tendencies – particularly the individual accumulation of wealth.

This emphasis on the individual spread beyond the areas of commerce. Humanist thought, the discovery of man of himself and the world around him, brought new levels of self-awareness and pride, while giving a value to the earthly existence that was denied in Medieval Christian thought. Interest was developed in ideas, both new and old, and priority was given to the eloquent depiction of those ideas. Every subject was open to exploration, with the idea of the “Renaissance man” being one who was versatile and universal, having a broad range of interests, knowledge and abilities. Scholars worked to re-discover the ideas of the past (particularly those of ancient Greece and Rome) and

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30 The model of Renaissance government is the Italian city-state. However, each country in Europe developed along slightly different lines.

31 Leonardo da Vinci is often seen as the epitome of the Renaissance man. Displaying an infinite curiosity and inventive ability, da Vinci was an accomplished and renowned painter, scientist, engineer, mathematician, inventor, anatomist, sculptor, musician and writer.
reconcile them with developments of the present. Specific focus was given to the liberal arts: history, literature, poetry, art, grammar, philology and rhetoric. Humanists strove to understand human nature, and to communicate their ideals to a broad audience.

Renaissance thought developed for around 100 years before it began to migrate into Northern Europe, attracting the attention of the courts and learned classes. While introductions to these ideas came in many forms (through traders/merchants, bankers, political embassies and ecclesiastical leaders), the strongest influence came from foreign students who traveled to Italy and, upon returning to their homelands, spread the school of thought they had been taught. This diffusion increased in the 1500’s with the increasing availability of ideas due to the burgeoning printing establishment (Breisach 326).

With the increase in the exchange of ideas across the Alps, there also developed a heightened awareness of the culture of their southern neighbors. Northern Europe continued to view Italy as a separate and unique society; however, with these new ideas, the persistent establishment of Italy as an “Other” began to shift from suspicion and hostility (the viewing of Italy as the home of all vices) to fascination and wonder. This shift, and the developing desire to embrace and embody all things “Italian”, provided an open and accepting environment where the new and strange commedia dell’arte could play and flourish.

The Exotic Other

“Since all travel narrative traditionally embraces the art of lying and most travelers
are, in some sense or other, expert poseurs, the painter of the photographer may be said to be colluded in an elaborate fraud."


The idea of “the Other”, though considered by many philosophers (such as Hegel and Sartre) was fully developed through the ideas of Emmanuel Levinas, a French Lithuanian philosopher who states that “the Other” is that which is outside the Being. In other words, it is the ‘non-I’, that which is strange and different from the Same, and has an irreducibility to the ‘I’ (Levinas 33). In this sense, each defined group (those that would eventually emerge as, and define themselves as, countries) separated themselves through the recognition of those who were different from themselves: religiously, politically, culturally and geographically. While each distinguishable European culture created an Other worthy of comparison and confrontation, the extreme separation and differences of the Italians – geographically, culturally and politically – produced an increased fascination among all Northern Europeans with a people that appeared as even more removed and exotic.

The doors opening to reveal the culture, society and art of Italy were aided by the political scene that was developing across Europe. While not continuing as the political stronghold that had been created during the Roman Empire, political connections to the Italian city-states was still seen as a significant bargaining point between the struggling powers of Europe and, therefore, strongly desired. Most often, these connections would be established by the marriage of a Northern European monarchy to Italian nobility. The resulting blood relations led to an open and friendly environment for the importation of Italian artists and musicians, and a growing fascination with all things Italian.
The desire to learn more about and to experience “Italy” was met through two primary means. The first revolved around the influx of travelers making the arduous journey to the Italian peninsula itself. The spark of Renaissance thought in Northern Europe in the late fifteenth century had created a similar interest in “classic” education, and its followers were desirous of expanding their knowledge and awareness of the classical ideals, writings, and art. With the strength of the movement in Italy, and the greatest works and teachers being located there, their emerged a desire to travel to the land that was attracting so much attention. Travelers choosing to make the perilous journey over the Alps included the young artists and scholars of Northern Europe, as well as the curious wealthy.\textsuperscript{32} Travelers from England, Germany, France, Scandinavia, Eastern Europe and Russia flocked to handful of major Italian centers, with their journeys creating a trend of travel writing, describing the land, culture and people with whom they came into contact. However, the writings that were published and spread through their homelands was little more than a “persuasive fiction of modern Italian society”, with opinions varying from the retelling and valorizing of Italy’s cultural past to the condemnation for its “backwardness, poverty and papal domination” (West 1,15).

Though authors ranged in their value of Italy in their depictions, all placed emphasis on the differences between the Italian culture and the native one of the author. While recognizing Italy for its status in international trade and wealth, as well as the influences on the intellectual and court culture, depictions emphasized the unfamiliar and

\textsuperscript{32} Perhaps the greatest example of this fascination is the development of the Grand Tours (1600-1850). Developing mostly in England (though growing to include wealthy families from many European countries), amateur tourists (usually young men) were sent on an established tour of Europe to fill out their classical education. Usually starting in London, and heading to Paris, the essential visiting place was Italy. The traveler would spend months in Northern Italy (Florence, Pisa, Bologna, Venice) before journeying to Rome and eventually Naples.
mysterious tendencies of the country, provoking a sense of wonderment and curiosity. Italy was seen as “the site of radical, radicalized and/or immoral otherness” (Bovilsky 625). Sun-drenched, picturesque landscapes gave proper backdrop to tales of its “heat” and “warmth”, with its male inhabitants being dark, handsome and amorous and its females being beautiful, voluptuous, and mysterious. The spread of these writings, and the return of the travelers, created an exotic and alluring picture of this southern country.

The Italian sonnets of John Milton give a great insight into the mindset of one Northern European country: the English. In her essay, Black Beauties, White Devils: The English Italian in Milton and Webster, Lara Bovilsky describes the fascination of the English writers with Italian depictions. She says:

Early modern English figurations of the Italian draw on a tradition of English veneration for Italy, imagined as a culture which exports humanism. Petrarchism, courtiership, and literary sophistication: but alongside veneration, these figurations express English fascination and contempt…Italian subjectivist was depicted in as charged a discourse of otherness as the English xenophobic imaginary had to offer. Italy represented a nation among whose most famous identity effects were Popery, atheism, sodomy, murder and poison, deceit, “practice”, erotic obsession and sexual promiscuity, and a preternatural propensity for revenge…[things] that both shocked and titillated. (627)

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33 Two eighteenth century novels, Ann Radcliff’s The Italian Love and Eliza Haywoods’s Love in Excess, give great insight into the exotic portrayals of the Italian people.

34 Francesco Petrarca (1304-74), an Italian scholar and poet. His poetry (where he is attributed as perfecting the sonnet) immortalized the ideas of romantic and courtly love, specifically through his descriptions of a woman named Laura. Petrarca is often called the father of both the Renaissance and Humanist thought.
Milton, in his depictions, focused mostly on the idea of love – and the idea of the Italian monopoly on the subject. In his 1645 collection of poems entitled *Poems of Mr. John Milton, both English and Latin, Composed at Several Times*, his “English” section (assumed to have been written around 1628) represents the time that he believes himself to be deeply and passionately in love. The depth and ardor of his love, according to his logic, leaves him no choice but to express himself in Italian. While publication in Italian was, at this time, highly unusual, the labeling of his Italian sonnets as “English” outraged contemporary decorum, while at the same time delineating a connection between the idea of love and Italian (which Bovilsky claims was suggested nearly a hundred years earlier in the popular translations and approximations of Petrarch’s poems by Wyatt and Surrey).

The claim by Milton that the expression of love and this “lingua ignota e strana” (“unknown and strange tongue”) (which, interestingly enough, is never referred to as Italian – only “new” and “strange”) highlights the idea that love itself is strange, unknown and foreign to the English, and distinctly Italian. This is also emphasized in the description of his love, strange to the accepted English conventions of beauty:

\[
\text{Nè treccie d’oro, nè guancia vermiglia} \\
\text{M’abbaglian si, ma sotto nuova idea} \\
\text{Pellegrina bellezza che’l cuor bea}
\]

(Neither golden locks, nor ruddy cheeks
Dazzle me so, but molded on a new and strange form,
A foreign, rare beauty which delights my heart.) (Sonnet 4, 5-7)
The “new” and “strange” form of his beloved revolves around her darkness – the physical form of her foreignness. She lacks golden hair, has eyes “d’amabil nero” (of a lovely blackness) (Sonnet 4, 9) and encourages his use of this foreign language to express his feelings by saying that “Questa è lingua di cui si vanta Amore” (This is the language of which Love is proud) (Canzone 15). Milton, like other writers, delighted his audiences through the depictions that emphasized the foreign descriptions of the Italian people.

While the ideas and assumptions of all things “Italian” and “exotic” were experienced through the travels of some, and the writings of others, the fascination and desire to experience “Italy” was also indulged through the second means of diffusion: the diaspora of Italian artists that journeyed into the North. Artists, musicians, opera performers, and theatre troupes promoted Italian cultures, continued the exotic reputation that was already being spread and created an attraction to all things “italianata”. The increasing accessibility of “Italy” through the migration of artists allowed contact with, acception of, and a believed understanding of the exotic Other.

Italians artists would often be summoned by the monarchs of Europe to serve in their courts, many in effort to create a cultural program for the nobility. Augustus II of Dresden and Elector Palatine at Düsseldorf assembled a large supply of artists, musicians, poets and even physicians from Italy in order to promote their music and visual culture, with Augustus II actually establishing a building program to create a version of the Venetian Grand Canal on his River Elbe. The artists would remain for whatever time period was necessary to fulfill the commission given to them, whether in painting portraits, creating architecture, or providing entertainment for the commemoration of a particular occasion. Examples such as the celebration of the marriage of Elector Palatine
to Maria Luisa (daughter of Cosimo III de’Medici) by the invited artist Antonio Belluci or summoned performance of the castrato 35 Cusanino to mark the coronation of Emperor Charles VI (1723) are varied and numerous across the countries in Europe (West 5-6).

Beyond royal summoning, Italian artists would travel to northern lands, establishing communities and networks, often working together for longer periods of time, and widening their specialties. Artists, as well as specialists in interior design, such as Antonio Pellegrini and Marco Ricci (both well-known as easel painters and decorators), would often reach out to satisfy the strong demand for scenic designers in the theatre, working on both plays and operas. The easy access to the foreign and strange ways of the Italians by having artists established in and viewed in their cities appealed to their fascination with and desire to experience things Italianata. One of the demonstrations of the Italian diaspora was the traveling commedia dell’arte troupes, and the lure of their performances laid in the difference they displayed to their accepted theatre: their manifestation of the exotic Other.

The genre of commedia dell’arte was foreign, strange and exotic to the people of Northern Europe – both in its style and methods of presentation – and yet reached a popularity that has yet to be surpassed in international theatre. The Medieval theatrical tradition, with its ties to the local guilds, did not promote extensive traveling and initially, in the fifteenth century, the idea of traveling troupes was atypical. Already faced with the very real hazards that faced travelers during this time, the potential problems of

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35 The Castrati (literally defined as the castrated) were a uniquely Italian creation in the opera scene. Young males would be identified as potential great singers and castrated before puberty in order to maintain the high, clear pre-pubescent voice. The development of the male physique (with the strong chest and lung muscles) combined with the high voice created a sensation in the opera world, where famous Castrati were treated like gods. Many famous opera composers (including Mozart, in works such as The Marriage of Figaro and the character of Cherubino) wrote specific parts to highlight the abilities of the Castrati.
epidemics, overburdening of resources, religious differences and criminal activity made local populations uneasy with the idea of opening their boarders, and long legal battles were endured in order to gain admittance to foreign audiences (Castagno 58). However, two main factors led the troupes to foreign lands from the beginnings of its development.

The first was the genre’s connection to Carnival. Early performances would follow the “cyclical period of liminality” of Carnival (beginning yearly at the Epiphany in January and ending on Ash Wednesday in February). Described as a “rovesciamento (overturning, revolution) of normative societal structure”, Carnival fanned the irreverent, festive nature of the genre, while the established cyclical pattern helped develop the circular touring pattern of the troupes in search of the second factor: the lure of new audiences. The resistance to the foreign troupes was quickly overcome, and as their popularity and reputation spread, invitations to journey to specific courts and towns were issued in efforts to gain access to the Italians.36

The Italian method of performance was strange to its Northern European audiences. Medieval theatre had been a “temple, a cathedral, a place for solemn ritual”, where religious issues were explored and conveyed (Freund 114). Initial Renaissance drama (comedies and tragedies) had looked back to the classical arts of Greece and Rome, tailored to the aristocracy and fostered by the emerging popular academies (groups of intellectuals and literary lovers who would meet to discuss, explain and examine literature and art) and the whims of the courts. Theatre pieces worked almost

36 The importance of these invitations is perhaps best exemplified by the commedia dell’arte troupes in Paris. Under the strict monopoly laws that governed the French theatre in the sixteenth century, there was by the 1570’s only one public theatre and one guild that were legally allowed to perform there, Confrerie de la Passion. Every other troupe was refused permission except the commedia dell’arte groups, who had the ability to rent out the Hotel de Bourgogne (Freund 436-37). French control remained strong, and a maximum of 5 professional troupes were recognized by Moliere’s death in 1673. Out of those 5, one of those troupes was a commedia dell’arte.
exclusively from written scripts (Petrarca, Ariosto, Machiavelli) and were performed mostly by amateurs or nobles in the court. Commedia dell’arte, however, as a bawdier, popular form of theatre, had developed along different lines and presented a new, foreign type of theatre that, while unfamiliar to audiences, piqued their interest and grabbed their attention, and introduced the Northern Europeans to the exotic “Italians”.

While commedia dell’arte troupes developed their performances around the familiar stories of love, intrigue, disguises\(^{37}\), the appeal to the Northern Europeans revolved around the new and different presentation style. The troupes’ determination to perform in their native language(s) and keep their specific cultural attributes, while still pleasing a large international audience, necessitated the further development of their inherent performance styles as well as a willingness to adapt and codify their mode of presentation. These skills, however, not only secured their survival, but created a large popularity for the genre in their international homes.

\textit{All’improvviso}

\begin{quote}
\textit{The acting of comedies all’improvviso was an invention of our centuries and was unknown to the ancients...Furthermore, it seems that only in fair Italy has this so far been achieved.}
- Perrucci, \textit{Dell’arte rappresentative}, (1699)
\end{quote}

\(^{37}\) A section of the scenario \textit{The Faithless Friend}, by Flaminio Scala, shows the dependence on these traits
At that moment, the Captain enters without a lantern, hears Isabella, and talks in a whisper, disguising his voice. Pedrolino thinks it is Oratio disguised as a Spaniard; giving the signal, he calls him, then tells Isabella that she is to go with Oratio...The Captain takes her in his arms and carries her off, Pedrolino following after...
Oratio then enters disguised, and remarking that it is nearly dawn, gives the signal for taking Isabella away. At that moment, Flaminia, in Isabella’s hat and cape, comes out of the house. Oratio thinks she is Isabella and takes her by the hand.
Playing to foreign audiences highlighted the useful and necessary style of improvisation and adaptation that the style of *commedia dell’arte* revolved around, while creating a different and exotic style of acting that was accepted and codified as the uniquely “Italian” method of performance. Characterized by its energy, physicality, concentration and ensemble play, the improvisation created an acting style that not only, as *commedia dell’arte* scholar Virginia Scott claims “made the *commedia dell’arte* famous at home and welcome throughout Europe” (5), but allowed them to overcome the cultural and linguistic boundaries that separated the audience from the performance.

The production of plays that developed out of written scripts created a studied acting style that was currently the standard norm in Northern Europe. Acting techniques revolved around formal oratorical delivery and restricted postures, often seen as pompous and described as strutting, chanting, ranting and roaring. The focus of most performances was on the effective delivery of lines with spoken verse, which often followed poetic meter and rhyming methods. The best actors were known for their strong rhetorical skills with their lines being memorized (or given on stage through the use of the prompter or bookholder) and often spoken in a singsong rhythm. Attention to the words was also emphasized through the introduction and adoption of perspective scenery. While creating an illusion of depth or three-dimensional quality through the painting and placement of flat surfaces, perspective scenery severely limited the movement of the actors. As the perspective was sharply forced, the “farthest” building would often be no higher than the actor’s waist, and in order to preserve the illusion, actors were most often contained to the apron, of forefront, of the stage. This focus on the words and the oratory shifted with the development of *commedia dell’arte*, where the performing *all’improvviso*
(improvised) centered the attention on the physical manifestation of the performance.

Riccoboni described the difference as follows:

The player who acts *all’improviso* performs in a more vivacious and natural way than the player who has learned a part. Feeling comes more readily, and thus one can better say what one has composed oneself, than what is drawn from others by the help of memory…Appearance, memory, voice, identification do not suffice for an actor who wishes to perform impromptu, unless he enjoys a live and fertile imagination and a facility in expression… (61-62)

While it is a mistake to believe that the performances were literally and completely “spur of the moment” and impromptu, the use of *canovacci* instead of scripts eliminated the dependency on the written, developed word. More than anything, spontaneity was a key feature in giving the *impression* in performance of being completely unrehearsed and planned, while at the same time being meticulously executed. Richards describes it as the following:

The actors did not, then, simply spawn new plot-lines, dialogue, and *lazzi* as they went along. Successful [professional] improvised performance,…,was the outcome of long deliberation by, and close collaboration between, members of a troupe accustomed to playing together, and familiar with each other’s stage *personae*. Disciplined performance did not exclude the introduction of unpremeditated verbal arabesques and the elaboration of ‘business’ on the spur of the moment; it was indeed spontaneous to the extent that it permitted a certain free play in performance for the expression of the performer’s character,

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38 While it was not unheard of, especially during the beginnings of the genre, for the troupes to have written scripts in their repertoire, the *commedia dell’arte* built its reputation around performing *all’improviso*. 

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temperament, particular specialist skills, and personal performance ways with assimilated materials. But it was rooted in careful preparation. (187)

The best troupes were able to take the premeditated material and exploit the unique position they were in at that particular performance. This style of performance emphasized the fact that commedia dell’arte was, in fact, a theatre of the actor, and that success came from the “novelty of perfectly executed action and the total identification of the actor with his character – the first time this miracle took place” (qtd in Scott 98). The emphasis on the actor is shown in the prologue to Flaminio Scala’s *Il finto marito* (*The Fake Husband*) (1618). Based off of his canovaccio called *Il marito* (*The Husband*), which was included in his 1611 collection, Scala defines the status of the performer who ‘composes’ a play through methods of improvisation.

THE PLAYER: I think the real art of making plays well belongs to those who perform them well, because if experiences is what teaches, then those it can best teach to write them down well are those who best have the ability to shape and perform the actable scenario – provided they were not born in the backwoods, or where they say ‘I’ for ‘me’. But tell me please, in what does such an art consist?

THE STRANGER: In observing the rule and imitating as much as possible

THE PLAYER: Who can know the rules of the art better than the players themselves? Every day they put them into practice by exercising the art, and thus they learn by doing. Who is better in the art of imitation than they? They not only imitate emotion and plausible action, but by introducing a number of dialects are obliged to give accomplished imitation not just in their own dialect,
but in other dialects too. Of course there would be nothing remarkable about that if a Venetian had no problem speaking in Florentine, nor a Florentine in Bergamask! (10-11)

The demands of this style of performance necessitated a new breed of actors, trained in the physical instead of the oratorical. Riccoboni stated that the “player who acts all’improvviso performs in a more vivacious and natural way than the player who has learned a part” (61). Instead of the standard from of recitation, with emphasis on vocal qualities, commedia dell’arte actors focused on the complete body in performance. Riccoboni continues:

Appearance, memory, voice, identification do not suffice for an actor who wished to perform impromptu, unless he enjoys a live and fertile imagination and a facility in expression, or if he lacks delicacies of language, and has not acquired all necessary understanding of the nature of his role. (62)

The focus on improvisation and physical acting naturally required a troupe that was equally trained and created a dependence on ensemble playing. With each actor developing one specific character over the course of his career, and with troupes revolving around family members39 that lived, worked, and traveled together, performers worked to create an environment that was conducive and “safe” for ensemble improvisation. Duchartre describes it as “ultimately achiev[ing] a sort of unity of mind, each man having a perfect knowledge of the weaknesses of his partner” (73). The

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39 Family members would often pass down a role from generation to generation, passing on tricks, secrets, and famous lazzī that they (or their precedents) had developed. Players often intermarried, and it was common to find that “Columbine was Harlequin’s wife in real life as well as on stage. And these circumstances not only served to strengthen the cohesion of the troupe, but enhances the naturalness of the acting” (Duchartre 73).
longevity of the troupes, and their intimate knowledge of each member, created a sense of ensemble play that supported the needs and requirements of improvised performance.

Overall, with the techniques to perform *all’improvviso*, with a focus on the physicality and the intimate ensemble acting, the performers were recognized for their unique style on the stage. In comparing the Italian acting style to the concurrent French style, Scott reports the following:

The classical French actor had a presence, a memory, and a voice; the Italian actor had as well a body, and active mind, and – most especially – a consciousness, what a modern actor would call concentration. Improvisation demands attention. The actor cannot function as a solo performer, a speaker of arias, but must be immediately aware of everything around him, imminently ready for whatever another actor chooses to do…Add to the concentration required by improvisation the demands of chases, leaps, pratfalls, beatings, and physical action of all sorts, where a second’s lapse of attention can mean injury and even death, and the result is an actor who is alive on the stage, natural, ready to ‘play the moment’.” (98-99)

This presentation of a live, natural performance, with actors ready to “play in the moment”, created a new, “exotic” style of acting for the audiences of Northern Europe, augmenting their developing fascination with things *italianata*. It also developed a belief among the troupes that movement and gesture, rather than words, lie at the heart of drama. This belief provided a base of physical acting that worked to create a level of communication across the linguistic boundaries, allowing the Italians to please their audiences abroad, while still keeping their native cultural influence and speaking in their native language(s).
Adaptation and Communication

“Although the Italian language might be the Armenian language to me, and my mind is so foolish that I can’t understand a word, I am going to see this troupe anyway, preferring to eat less soup and drink a little less wine than not see Trivelin.”
- Loret, *La muze historique*, (1653)

While the strange acting style and rising fascination with the exotic “Italian” served as a draw for the audiences, the continued survival of the troupes abroad rested on their ability to balance this sense of Otherness with the need of the audience to comprehend enough of the performance on stage to experience fulfillment (and to want to return). In order to meet the challenge, the *commedia dell’arte* created ways for the audience to “know” and “understand” the very things that they also saw as exotic and different.

Stock characters in the Roman theatre tradition came from their school of rhetoric and were little more than “ciphers – the king, the nurse, the son, the dutiful chorus of acolytes” whose action revolved entirely from their status (Grant 29). This idea of acting only according to your role or station in life also follows the writings of Aristotle’s *The Poetics*, when he describes his second element of drama, Character (Ethos). Here the character functions directly out of and is created by the plot. Instead of having a psychological background, the character is a “type” that can only function within their station (a king, for example, can only behave in a “kingly” manner). The character then became a summation of his/her actions, which has propensity of either good or bad.
The original Roman stock characters had been propagated through the mountebank tradition. Peddlers of “quack medicine” and often seen as charlatans, the mountebank troupes would tour throughout the year, with their prime time occurring during Carnival when the crowds of the piazzas of the great cities would become magnets to their platform performances. The following description of the cleric Ottonelli describes the general practice:

At times a company of these good fellows appears in a town…They widely publicise their wish to serve the public by selling astonishing cures and performing excellent plays – and all this they claim to do free of charge, and from no more than a wish to please and entertain. They select a place in the public square where they set up their platform, and on this first the charlatan, then the actors perform. Each day at a convenient hour a Zanni or some similar entertainer steps onto the stage and begins to perform of sing in order to attract a crowd about him. A little later, another player appears, and then another…Then all in a group, and with various kinds of trickery, they present a mixed bag of popular entertainment. Suddenly the key figure appears – he who is the arch charlatan, the guardian of the elixir – and in subtle ways he sets about extolling his wonderful cure-all in the most extravagant terms. (455-56)

The mountebanks, by pulling in the zanni, the vecchi and other ciphers from the Roman tradition, made these characters accessible to the contemporary theatre audience, as well as to other performers. As high and low culture began to integrate, opportunities developed for theatre as a business, blurring the lines between the amateur and professional companies. Acting as a reputable career became a possibility, not only as a
solo performer or in informal and random gatherings of individual entertainments, but as a banding together to create formally constituted acting companies. As the individual performers (jongleurs, troubadours, jesters and others) banded together to form professional *commedia dell’arte* companies, they also instigated a more intense development of the recognizable stage types. In their more fully developed stock characters, the *commedia dell’arte* troupes created a firm and recognizable Other, a personage with a nature that was abstractedly appealing. Anthony Caputi, in his book *Buffo: the genius of vulgar comedy* (1978), describes them as not being

…without human interest: they are in love, they are vengeful, they are avaricious, the hunger, they lust, and they feel pain when they are beaten. But these traits are typically simplified and exaggerated so that we see virtually nothing of the complexity which usually accompanies them in human beings. The characters always retain a strange abstractness, “strange” because though they move in a concrete commonplace world and reflect commonplace needs, they are always notably reduced as human figure. This prompts the beholder to view the total image as if at a distance, prompts him to adjust to the whole, to focus the whole, as he has focused the characters. (176-77)

This abstractness, or “strangeness”, of the stock characters was highlighted even further in the *commedia dell’arte* due to the use of the masks. With the masks covering the upper half of the face, and specifically due to their capacity to obscure the eyes, the characters were removed and separated one additional step than was the norm, allowing

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40 Though different in its physical form and use, *Commedia dell’arte* is the only Western theatre form that revived the Greek tradition of constant and continuous use of masks in performance.
to exist in a “kind of ‘anti-world’” that allowed them to exhibit their Otherness (Castagno 85).

However, the exaggerated separation created by the masks was juxtaposed with the efforts of the troupes to make them readily identifiable to their international audience. As previously discussed, certain characters were easily recognized by their Italian counterparts and the same characters were continuously used in every performance by every troupe. The identity of these same characters was pushed and codified within their international homes, creating an “intertextual” recognition due to their precise physical mask formation (coloring and specific exaggerated features), exact identifiable costume choices, and standard movement 41. For example, Arlecchino, one of the most famous international characters, was known not only through his status as a zanni, but the character was transported from troupe to troupe, performance to performance, through his recognizable physical attributes. His mask was dark, often black, and is described as a “grotesque mask with deep furrows, a flat nose and pinhole eyes, often boarded with dark hair and full eyebrows” (Granatham 182). His clothing was a suit of patches (eventually appearing in standard diamond shape) in the principle colors of red, yellow and green with hat that included the feather of a hare and he carried on his belt a botoccio (slapstick). Though his standard position revolved around a classic commedia dell’arte

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41 In tying together the relationship between the movement and the mask, Allardyce Nicoll, author of World of Harlequin, states that, while highlighting the essential theatricality of the production, the Italians use of the mask was “simply keeping true to the spirit of the theatre they served. At the same time, they found that these masks had a special value for their own kind of performances. A mask has a personality of its own and the further virtue of placing emphasis on the actor’s whole body. Harlequin’s personality depends partly on his suppleness; since he is masked our eyes are intent upon him in his entirety, not merely upon his feature; as a result a witticism emanating from that eternally fixed countenance has a flavour quite different from the witticism issuing out of the lips which are part of a living face; and a gesture which might easily be missed when our attention is directed towards a comedian’s features suddenly assumes an unwonted and even strange significance.” (41)
stance, he was physically quick and seldom stayed still. He had four signature walks: Grand Zanni (also known as the Harlequin Trot), Two-Step, Three-Step, and the Zanni Stanco, which he rotated throughout performance to convey his moods.

Troupes worked to make sure the character was recognized the moment s/he entered on the stage, and that, through this recognition and familiarity with the stock characters, his/her reactions to the scene would be anticipated by the audience. In order to secure this recognition, and to underline the essential nature of the ability of the audience to recognize the specific character, the troupes determined a unique style of presentation at the initial entrance of each mask. Known as “Establishing the Mask”, the actor, upon his/her first entrance, would take a few paces until the entire audience could view him/her. Then s/he would pause with the face in profile, turn his/her mask to view the audience straight on and then turn back to profile to continue on with the show. This practice allowed the audience to familiarize themselves with the mask, identify it, and situate the character within the plot (Grantham 118-119). This effort in establishing the characters and their personalities, allowing the audiences to understand the Other,

42 The commedia stance revolves around ballet’s 2nd position. Feet are turned out and about hips width apart. Legs are in a medium bend (demi-plié). The rear end and chest are both pushed out, creating a j-curve in the back. Arms are bent at the elbows proportionally to the legs. The head exists on a separate plane, moving with quick, jerky movements. (Fava)

43 Grand Zanni – for basic walking movement: starting in basic commedia stance, the left leg is raised, with knee bent and foot pointed. The opposite arm is simultaneously raised, and the stomach contracts. The step is repeated with the opposite arm/leg.

   Two-step – to show excitement: weight is on the toes, with the body leaning backwards. Movement forward is quick and light, on the toes, with arms and legs moving in opposition.

   Three-step – to show alacrity: Begin with the ball of the right foot coming to meet the heel of the left foot. The left foot then forward. The right foot then steps forward into the opposite starting position. The walk follows an even three time, i.e. one, two, three.

   Zanni Stanco: to show exhaustion – Slower version of the two-step, with the weight of the body being forward, instead of back, adding a heaviness to the body. Shoulders are slumped and arms move in opposition. (Fava, Grantham, Rudlin).
supported the effort of communication due to the practice of reusing the same plot
devices and characters, both within and across troupes.

The abandonment of literary text\textsuperscript{44} in favor of performing all'improvviso had
already led to a stronger delineation of the form of the genre, with the canovacci
normally structured to follow the three-part structure of the neo-Roman comedies (which
were believed to be perfectly balanced). Plots followed a simple outline. A young man
loves a woman, but there is an obstacle (his father, her father, another lover) that
prohibits their marriage. Through the show, that obstacle is overcome with the help, and
usually by a scheme devised by, a clever servant. Complications could arise through
another (stupid) servant, another lover, or a capitano. For example, the outline of Scala’s
*The Faithful Friend* (written by himself) reads as follows:

Oratio and Isabella are in love and want to marry. However, her father
(Pantalone) objects and plans to marry her off to Captain Spavento. In order to be
together, Oratio has a plan for them to run away together, and needs the help of
his best friend Flavio. However, unbeknownst to Oratio, Flavio is also madly in
love with Isabella and despairs of staying loyal to his friend. The plan has Oratio
abducting Isabella and hiding her at Flavio’s house with his sister Flaminia (who
is, of course, secretly in love with Oratio). Lots of disguises, fights, and
adventures lead to honest recognition of the heart, the true display of loyalty, and
the eventual marriage of the four lovers – Oratio and Flaminia, and Flavio and
Isabella.

\textsuperscript{44} This is not to say that there was no literary drama being performed during this time period. However,
troupes performing what would later be classified as *la commedia dell’arte*, committed to the improv genre.
Within the plotline, the *canovacci* were developed along a line that appeared most
efficient and effective to the audience. Each scene that developed the plot was alternated
with an “ornamental scene”, which also alternated between the sentimental and the
comic. Scott outlines it with the sentimental scene usually being “a duet on themes of
romantic love while the comic scenes include the quibbles of the old men, the bravuras of
the captain and the lazzis of the zanni” (124).

The establishment of a standard plot outline allowed the needs of the character to
be codified. Each standard *canovacci* required the same characters to reappear: 2 sets of
*innamorati*, 2 *vecchi*, 2 *zanni*, with other parts being used as “fillers” to change up the
plot. Riccoboni’s company in Paris listed the following cast list from 1716 to 1744:

**Men**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Actor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lelio (Innamorato)</td>
<td>Luigi Riccoboni</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mario (Second Innamorato)</td>
<td>Baletti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arlequin (Second Zanni)</td>
<td>Vicentini, called Thomassin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trivilen (First Zanni)</td>
<td>Pietro Francesco Biancolelli, called Dominique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pantaloon (Vecchi)</td>
<td>P. Alborghetti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Doctor (Vecchi)</td>
<td>F. Materazzi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scapin</td>
<td>J. Bissoni</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scaramouche</td>
<td>Giacopo Raguzzini</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Women**
The set structure of the scenes and cast gave a foundation from which the actors could springboard, allowing the audience a base of understanding that allowed the Italians to continue to perform in their different style.

Another balancing act between the Other and understanding occurred in the highly physical method of presentation. While the plurality of dialects in Italy had allowed the actors to create specific characters that resonated with specific regional groups, the presentation of those same characters to audiences speaking a different dialect or language resulted on a necessary reliance on the physicality and typology to carry across their messages. Accordingly, as previously discussed, the Italian actor focused on the training of the body over the voice, a style of performance that was strange to the Northern European audience. However, while exotic in its presentation, by favoring the body over the voice, the actors continued to have a stronger mode of communication that was readily accessible while entertaining. By heightening their established method of physical, pantomimic playing, the troupes created a “kind of lingua franca which enabled them to cross language boundaries with some ease” (Richards 267).

Saying that verbal play had no importance in the commedia dell’arte shows would be incorrect. The Innamorati, for instance, would often memorize poems or passages of
literature that could be inserted, and the zanni would work out pieces of verbal word play as part of their lazzì. However, the largest effort in communicating on a broader scale relied on the training and use of the body of the actor. The early recognition of this need in Italy provided a foundation on which the actors could build abroad, allowing them to further push this practice that “enhanced their usefulness in foreign countries where language barriers did not prevent audiences from appreciating the physical, gestural style of the Italian actors” (West 12). As Riccoboni stated in his writings:

The Italian player dont [sic] always use to play their parts extempore; they have, as I shall shew by and by, sometimes learned it by heart, according to the different Ages in which they lived. But in those Courts in Europe who are not so well acquainted with the Italian Language, and where the Italian Players are sought after and encouraged, they have done entirely to the extempore Manner, and it is under this Character that they are known over all Germany, and particularly in France. (66)

The focus on the physical was not just a matter of linguistic happenstance. The emphasis on physical acting is borne out of the ancient challenge issued by Cicero, a famous Roman philosopher and orator who sought to determine whether the best way to communicate thought was through word or gesture. The emphasis on physical action and movement revolved around the strong belief that the answer to Cicero’s question was gesture. Scala’s prologue show this ideology when The Player states the following:

That feelings are aroused more by gestures than words is obvious, for intelligent men, and even brute beasts, will always better attend and obey those who use a stick than those who rely on words – for as the Bergamask says, ‘There’s a great
The gulf between asking and doing…plays properly and in essence consist in action, and only incidentally in narrations…The senses are more easily moved by the sense than by anything in the abstract, just as like is drawn to like. (14-15)

The use of highly physical acting, while emphasizing the exotic Otherness of the Italian theatre style, provided the troupes the ability to move their audiences “by the sense”, increasing their comprehension even as they delighted them with their physical antics.

The establishment and repetition of familiar plots and characters in every performance, the knowledge that the personality, status and characteristics would remain the same despite the different plots, and the concentrated efforts of the troupe to communicate through the physical body, allowed the audience members to gain a security in their understanding of the performance. With the ability to identify and recognize the characters and understand the story, despite the fact that it was presented in a foreign language, the popularity level of the commedia dell’arte escalated and spread through the countries where the troupes traveled.

This popularity quickly led commedia dell’arte performances into a position of “must-see” in Northern European society^45, despite the barriers of language and culture. Interest was fanned by the depictions of artists. Northern European artists, particularly Dutch and Flemish nationalities, specifically delighted in panting commedia dell’arte scenes, such as the The Marvellous Mallady of Harlequin, showing the characters and

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^45 The audience of the commedia dell’arte troupes evolved during its span of popularity. Initially the troupes performed for the common people. Then, searching for more economic stability, the troupes turned to their noble patrons and performed mostly for the courts. Eventually, by the eighteenth century, the troupes responded to and performed more for a mixed audience of the court and bourgeoisie.
scenes from different canovacci as they were vastly different than their normal tradition of genre and landscape painting\(^{46}\). Monarchs began to write to troupes, paying to bring

![Image of canovacci scenes](image)

**Fig. 6 Plates from The Marvellous Mallady of Harlequin, an illustrated Dutch scenario of the eighteenth century, designed by G.-J. Xavery and published by Petrus Schenk, Amsterdam.**

\(^{46}\) Interestingly enough, the iconography of the *commedia dell’arte* is made up almost solely by *stranieri*. Italian painters were usually commissioned to paint religious, historical, or mythological frescos and did not consider “street scenes” such as *commedia dell’arte* as “high art” worthy of their time. (Castagno 126)
them to their countries while their courts would battle over who had the most “Italian” activities to offer to their nobles and to their people. The journal of Pierre de L’Estoile recounts the following:

In this month [February, 1577] the troupes of Italian players called the Gelosi, which the King had expressly brought from Venice for his diversion, and for which he had paid a considerable ransom to the Huguenots Christmas last, began to give their plays in the hall of the Chateau at Blois, and the King has allowed them to do so for all who wish to see them…On Sunday 19 May [1577] the Italian actors called the Gelosi began to perform their plays in the hall of the Hôtel de Bourbon in Paris, requiring four sols a head from each French spectator wanting to see them act, and such a throng assembled that the four best preachers in Paris would not draw so great a crowd to their preaching. (qtd in Richards 269)

The delight of the French king continued to grow from one to the next to the point that King Louis XIV granted the title Comédiens du roi (Comedians of the King) to the resident commedia dell’arte troupe in 1665.

The ability of the troupes to develop the commedia dell’arte genre abroad, capitalizing on the Northern European fascination with things italianata through their inherent adaptive and improvised style, while still finding ways to communicate with

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47 The following letter from the French Queen, Maria de Medici to her brother, the Duke of Mantua (10 November 1606), shows the dealings of the nobility;

Dear Brother, When my sister the Duchess of Mantua left here I begged her to intercede with you on my behalf that you should send me a company of good players, for indeed I well know that the best in the whole of Italy are frequently in your state…I wish to write to you and request this favour: that you use you authority quickly to provide for us the best possible company, and I particularly want Arlecchino to be a member…[H]e and all his companions will be so rewarded and reimbursed for the expense of the journey, both here and back, and in addition we shall take so much care to please them and treat them well, that they will be wholly satisfied. This is something both the King and I very much desire. Therefore I beg you to arrange it.
their patrons, allowed them to not only gain acceptance but amass a huge popularity with their international audiences. However, while allowing the troupes to survive (and thrive) outside their native culture, the popularity and acceptance of this Italian theatre genre also provided an additional opportunity for the *commedia dell’arte*. As the people of Northern European became more comfortable with the genre and accepted it into their individual societies, the popularity also instigated a trend of adoption and integration into their own native cultures. This integration, specifically in the development of stock characters that represented their own social circumstances, solidified the possibility of *commedia dell’arte* working as a symbol for a culture outside of the one in which it was created.
Chapter Four: Crossing Boundaries

To cut across boundaries and borderlines is to live aloud the malaise of categories and labels. It is to resist simplistic attempts at classifying, to resist the comfort of belonging to a cultural or aesthetic genre, and of producing classifiable works.

- Trinh T. Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red*

From its conception, *commedia dell’arte* troupes proved their adept versatility in adapting to local needs no matter how unusual, strange or self-serving they happened to be. This willingness to change according to their audiences and situations provided opportunities for the genre to integrate itself into the societies for which they played, creating not only a fondness for the “Italian” theatre but a desire to incorporate it into their own culture and theatre. Playing off of the established practice of incorporating local life into the shows, Northern Europeans began to not only assimilate *commedia dell’arte* techniques into their native theatre but encouraged the creation of their own regional stock characters. This creation of a strong connection with local audiences served to both increase the popularity of the *commedia dell’arte* troupes abroad and establish it as a genre that effectively crossed international boundaries. The understanding of this adaptive process is essential for modern practitioners who wish to integrate *commedia dell’arte* effectively into today’s theatre.

While performing in their homeland, the troupes set a precedent of including local flavor into their shows. Often traveling troupes would arrive a few days early and spend the time mixing with the resident population, learning the gossip, scandals and concerns
of the people. Then, the troupes integrated that information into its performance, evolving it into jokes, innuendos and references that would provide a special, specific connection to the show for the audience. Most often local dignitaries were impersonated, caricatured and ridiculed, and their private lives and affairs (with many references to their amorous situations) were easily identified by the audiences.

Abroad, the troupes continued their tradition of integrating local color, both in performance, impersonations, and subject matter. Carlo Gozzi, a leader in the eventual “reform” of *commedia dell’arte*, writes in his memoirs of his experience with a troupe in Zara, a garrison town in Dalmatia, Yugoslavia. Stationed there with the Italian army, Gozzi joined the resident amateur troupe that played for the military troops as well as the local public, and Gozzi became famous for his impersonations of local leaders as well as the common people. The delight of the crowd is particularly interesting due to the high level of tension existing between the Italian troops and the native population, which Gozzi describes as follows in his *Useless Memoirs*:

> The Italians and the Illyrians do not dwell together without a certain half-concealed antipathy. This leads to frequent trials of strength and valour, in which the Italians are most to blame. They insult the natives and pick quarrels with a people famous for their daring and ferocity. (254).

As the troupe Gozzi joined consisted only of men, his most famous role was a derivative of the traditional soubrette, Columbina – usually a young and attractive serving girl. Gozzi’s character, “Luce” (the Dalmatian equivalent of Lucia), spoke in the local Dalmatian/Illyrian dialect and was a parody of the local serving girl. His self-declared masterpiece moment was in a show where he was playing Luce and was madly
improvising due to an unexpected fifteen minute wait for Pantalone to enter. Nervous by
the delay, he played a comic bit where Luce complained to the audience that she could
not provide enough milk to breastfeed her newborn child. At this particular moment he
noticed that a famous local prostitute, Tonina, was in attendance, dressed brightly and
laughing along with the rest of the audience. So, on stage, he called the baby Tonina and
warned her to not turn into a whore. The audience, in recognition of her notorious
reputation, roared with laughter while Tonina, red-faced with embarrassment, got up and
left the performance (DiGaetani 42).

The troupes in Paris became especially adept in including a number of French and
Parisian references. Some would include a mockery of currently running French drama,
such as *Arelquin et Scaramouche juifs errans de Babilonne* (January-March 1677) when,
in act 3, Arlecchino delays the dread moment of sacrifice by telling a story that “parodies
the messenger’s recital of the death of Hippolytus” in Racine’s *Phèdre* \^48\ (Scott 201). A
few set specific *canovacci* in Paris, such as *Le régal des dames* (1668), part of Domenico
Biancolelli’s collection of *zibaldoni*. Troupes would even call attention to the linguistic
barrier with bilingual *lazzi*. After being in residency in Paris for nearly 15 years, and
having an understanding and ability to incorporate the French language into their
scenes\^49\, a *canovaccio* played called *A fourbe, fourbe et demy* (October 1674). Here,
Dottore and Arlecchino create a joke that rests on the Dottore’s supposed inability to
understand French. Arlecchino is commissioned to deliver two love letters to the female

\^48\ Scholar Gueullette claims that the parody is actually a closer burlesque of Pradon’s *Phèdre et Hyppolite*
(Scott 201).

\^49\ While French words, lines, and even written scenes began to appear in some of the troupes performances,
most sources support the idea that the troupes never switched to performing entirely in French, or even that
the French language was ever vastly used. Italian (still in dialect) continued to be the primary “performing
language”.

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lovers who are kept under close guard by their father. He disguises himself as a gazetteer and, when interrupted by the Dottore, begins crying “the gazette, the gazette”. To avoid the complications when the Dottore expresses a wish to buy one, Arlecchino claims that the Dottore would be unable to understand it because it is written in French. The Dottore then asks him to read it and translate it into Italian for him. Arlecchino turns to the first lover’s window and begins to call to her in French, declaring himself sent by her lover but that he is detained by the interference of the Dottore. When the Dottore asks him to translate, he proceeds to say, in Italian, that he was reading an article about the Great Sophy and the aftermaths of his hunt. He then turns to the second lover’s window and repeats the joke, first declaring in French the love of his master and then ridiculing the Dottore. The Dottore again asks for a translation, to which Arlecchino describes the battles between the ships of Tunisia and Algeria.

While the initial joke is in the ability of Arlecchino to “dupe” the Dottore, delivering the love notes under his very nose by reading them in French, the twist comes at the end when the Dottore grabs the letter and pretends to read (in French) that: “There has arrived in this city a rascal who claims to be a gazetteer in order to carry love letter to two girls who are closely kept in their house, but the father having discovered him is going to beat him a hundred times with a stick” (qtd in Scott 200). The bilingual nature of the lazzi played as an inside joke to the regular commedia dell’arte audience, the ones who understood the troupes’ situation in France and their efforts to be understood by those who watched.

Though their use of satire and impersonations of the locals, and their adept ability to push scandal, forced the commedia dell’arte troupes to walk a fine line between
entertainment and subversion (in France, a perceived slight to the King’s mistress, Mme de Maintenon, in the production *La Fusse Prude* or *La finta matrigna*, led to a royal decree of exile in 1697) the practice established by the troupes of adapting to their current surroundings laid a foundation that supported continued (and more extreme) change. As their popularity grew abroad, the countries of Northern Europe began to both assimilate the techniques and characteristics of *commedia dell’arte* into their own native theatre and adapt existing stock characters into their own culturally specific characters that would then be integrated into the Italian performances. While remaining Italian in its presentation, these assimilations and creations allowed the genre of *commedia dell’arte* to establish itself as a symbol of the people in its foreign homes.

**Assimilation and Adaptation**

*If it is a question, for future authors, of establishing a New Comedy, a universal comedy, and of writing them out very legibly, in terms which everyone would find intelligible, they would perhaps find it necessary to once again study a theatrical form that we consider archaic, but which...fertiliz[ed] for several centuries, all of Western theatre...I’m speaking of this comedy of the Italian Renaissance known as the commedia dell’arte.*

- Jacques Copeau

As previously discussed, the increasing fascination with the exotic things *italianta* resulted in the continual invitation of Italian artists, musicians and performers into the countries of Northern Europe. However, instead of keeping the Italians separate, and
distinctly Other, there began a trend of taking their work, internalizing their modes of presentations, styles and/or genres, and then “reshaping them with native practitioners and a ‘local’ accent” (West 16). Opera buffa (comic opera), for example, originated musically in Naples, spreading quickly to Rome, northern Italy, and then across the continent. However, in each country it manifested itself differently musically, playing off of local popular songs, started to use local talent and even developed different names (singspiel in Germany, ballad opera in England, zarzuela in Spain and opéra comique in France). The immense popularity of the commedia dell’arte caught the attention of the many playwrights and directors who were working to create a popular “national” theatre, and the techniques of the troupes began to influence not only their developing styles as they borrowed many of its elements, but integrated also into their native folk traditions.

**Ganassa and Bottarga in Spain**

A strong representative of the way in which commedia dell’arte not only gained popularity but was adapted and assimilated into the native theatre and culture is the work of the two most influential players in Spain, Zan Ganassa and Estefanelo Bottarga. Ganassa’s troupe, called after the stage name of their lead actor Alberto Naseli, toured Italy and France before arriving in Madrid in 1574. Playing mostly for the courts while in Italy and France, Ganassa’s troupe had to quickly adapt to the lack of court theatre in Spain. Instead they learned to play to the public, capitalizing on the novelty of the early

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50 Ganassa was a popular surname in the region of Bergamo during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Most likely Naseli adopted this name to establish the regional connection with the zanni character that he played.

51 There has been suggestion that Ganassa’s troupe was the company that played for the Earl of Lincoln in June 1572. However, the evidence is inconclusive and there is no other documentation to support the claim that Zan Ganassa played in England.
playing spaces, the *corrales*. For the next ten years, Ganassa’s troupe toured the cities of Spain, performing both their *commedia dell’arte* shows and responding to invitations to participate in the contemporary religious drama, the *autosacramentales*.

By 1579, Ganassa’s fame had spread to the point that he was invited to play before the King and Queen at the Corpus Christi festival. His popularity, however, was not just among the nobility. Reports in Seville in 1575 showed that the people were leaving their work ‘*por irse…tras aquella novedad*’ (to take… themselves to the novelty) and that the *Audiencia* (the judicial system) issued an order that he was only allowed to perform on public holidays (Shergold 361). His visit to the King in 1579 granted him the right to act on two working days a week, but after another year the municipal authorities of Madrid exiled him, citing that he was causing idleness among the people. These restrictions, however, did not prevent the troupe from performing, and after a brief tour outside, they returned to Madrid where the famous Spanish actor Saldaña and his company paid him the highest compliment by canceling their own performance in order to watch Ganassa’s troupe.

Perhaps the greatest example of his popularity is drawn from his 1582 performance to celebrate the wedding of D. Rodrigo de Mendoza, of the Dukes del Infantado, in Guadalajara. While a banqueting hall had been transformed to provide space for both a stage and the audience, the amount of people in attendance pushed the spectators onto the stage - with the large numbers leaving no room for the actors to actually perform.

Due to his popularity among the people, to the point of being a household name, the figure of Ganassa started to sprout up in the contemporary Spanish theatre and
literature. Lope de Vega, the emerging lead playwright of the Spanish Golden Age, made numerous references to Ganassa in his plays. Act III of his *Los Amantes sin Amor* (1601) has a character detailing a very fat woman\(^{52}\) as follows:

Merecíla, y mereciera

de palos; vino a mi casa;

acostéme con Ganasa,

que menos delito fuera

(Merecila, and she deserved
to be beat up; came to my home;

Going to bed with Ganasa,

Would be a lesser offense\(^{53}\)

The widespread fame is shown even better with the reference to Ganassa in Pedro Calederon de la Barca’s play, *Argenis y Poliarco* (1637). Calderon, though starting in the secular tradition, became the leading writer of religious *autosacramentales* in Spain.

Born in 1600 it is unlikely that he ever actually saw Ganassa perform, and yet in Act III of this play, he is mentioned:

Y conociéndole el Rey,

Luego a sus brazos te entregue,

Y él, como dice Ganasa,

Te reciba alegremente.

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\(^{52}\) The joke lies in the story that Ganassa had a very pronounced girth and used his weight for comic relief.

\(^{53}\) All Spanish-English translations provided by Nestor Bravo Goldsmith, a theatre director and scholar, a professionally trained Arlecchino and a native Spanish speaker.
(And the King knowing him,
Then to his arms delivers you
And he, as Ganasa says,
Receives you happily.)

The references went beyond the theatre and into the popular literature. P.de Flores, in his *Romancero general*, published in Madrid in 1614, also used a reference to Ganassa, depicted as full of cunning and guile as he deceives Trastulo (another *commedia dell’arte* character):

Estaua el pastor Gazpacho
apacentando vnos mulos…
Blasfemaua de amor,
que tiene tretas de puto,
que nos besa, y nos engaña,
como Ganasa a Trastulo. (296)

(It was Gazpacho, the shepherd
Pasturing some mules
Cursing out of love,
Which has tricks like a whore,
Kissing as well as cheating
Like Ganasa to Trastulo)
Less is known about Bottarga, who is first recorded in Valenica in January 1583. Known and recorded as playing both a *zanni* character and a Pantalone, Bottarga’s fame and popularity is specifically drawn out of the impact that he, along with Ganassa, made on Spanish folk culture. The stock characters of the *commedia dell’arte* began to be integrated into the national festivals and tournaments during the sixteenth century, and the name of Bottarga quickly became synonymous with the clownish character, which actually began to be called *botargas*. In a tournament in Madrid on March 31, 1590, it was recorded that “treinta y dos botargas de colorado, a caballo, tañiendo cada una diferentes músicas y hacienda diferentes visajes” (thirty-two botargas of color, on horseback, playing different musical instruments and wearing different masks) participated as a device of one of the contestants (Relación de la sortija... 229).

*Botargas* and *ganassas* were usually seen simultaneously, and were most famously depicted in the Carnival processions. In 1599, to celebrate the wedding of Philip II, the people of Valenica dressed as *ganassas* and *bortagas*. Lope led the festivities dressed as a *bortaga*, with a costume in the style of the Italian Pantalone, with a scarlet suit, a long black cape and a cap. Lope, speaking in Italian and riding a mule covered in succulent meats, represented Carnival while a King’s jester, dressed as a *ganassa*, represented Lent (Shergold 364).

*Botargas* continued to become an integral part of the Spanish festival culture, playing in cities all over Spain, including visits to the royal palace. The word *botarga* was defined in the published dictionaries, with additions in the *A Dictionary, Spanish & English, and English & Spanish* (1763), as: “the dress of an harlequin, and the harlequin himself; also the ridiculous figure they put before the bulls at the feasts of bulls in Spain”
and in the *Diccionario Nuevo de las Lengua Castellana o Española y Francesa* (1751) as a “hombre enmazcarado” (masked man). By the end of eighteenth century *botargas* were assimilated into local folklore and known as a Spanish pre-sixteenth-century tradition, and while little attention was given to their actual origins, the *botargas* dress continued with the remnants of Arlecchino, with a red and green costume which consisted of multi-colored patches.

However, beyond the mentioning of famous players in their own scripts, and the integration of *commedia dell’arte* characters into their festivals, Spanish theatre used the techniques, themes and characterizations of the Italian troupes to bridge between the previously accepted theatre and new Spanish Golden Age. Arriving at a time when Spanish theatre was still in its experimental stages, *commedia dell’arte* troupes helped to popularize the comedy of intrigue that was developed by Lope and others. The structure of the *canovacci*, performed in three acts, influenced writers as they switched from the classical standard of five acts. Stock characters, in their Italian forms (Arlecchino, Trastulo, Francheschina), were integrated into their works, with specific focus given to the *zanni*. There are even records of attempts to perform *all’improvviso*, and while it was largely abandoned, it instigated a tradition of actors recording in notebooks comic bits called *pasos* (after the tradition of the *zibaldoni*), with the ability to transfer whole scenes from one play to another (Shergold 367-68). While never creating an exact replication or imitation of the *commedia dell’arte* genre, the Spanish theatre allowed the popularity of the performance style to integrate into the very roots of Spanish culture, providing a continual link with the Italian theatre.
Beyond the assimilation of *commedia dell’arte* techniques and characters into their developing theatre, Northern European countries capitalized on the established technique of character creation. Abroad, the Italian troupes continued to use the characters created out of the specific cultural, social and economic situations of their native land (Arlecchino, Pantalone, Dottore, etc). While still providing entertainment and enjoyment to their foreign audience, the personalities and histories of these regionally connected characters assumedly did not establish as strong of a link between spectator and performer, due to the inherent cultural separation. In effort to adapt more fully to the situations that they were playing in abroad, troupes began to develop new characters that, while descending from an established Italian stereotype, integrated the unique culture, standards and concerns of specific Northern European countries. These characters, while continuing to play within the genre of *commedia dell’arte*, also crossed over into the developing native theatre, increasing the popularity and efficacy of the genre by establishing themselves as symbols of the people.

*Mr. Punch in England*

The Napolitano Pulcinella traveled across the Alps with the rest of the characters, though never established himself as a major player abroad. The adoption and adoration of the distinctly southern personality came only through the adaptation of the character to native Northern European tastes, evolving into a character that was more identifiable to his foreign audience.

By the seventeenth century, Pulcinella had developed into the French Polichinelle, a stooge to the quack doctor. The long, popular tradition of hunchbacked fools in French
folk tales, farces, and merrymaking led to the development of a hump on his back. The leading actors (Watteau, Lancret and Meisonier) began to pad their stomachs to further emphasize the grotesque hump and to dress in finery and ruffles, turning the “rough Italian peasant…into something more fantastic and Gallic”\(^54\) (Speaight 15).

At the same time as this development, the new, French Polichinelle caught the attention of the puppet and marionette theatre. The characters of la commedia dell’arte had been integrated into the Italian marionette and puppet theatre\(^55\) (called burratini) early on, with the characters turning into the presented puppets. In fact, commedia dell’arte troupes sometimes combined their live actors with the puppets\(^56\), while puppet theatres would use live commedia dell’arte actors in order to bring attention to their show, as described in the following 1666 poem by Colletet:

Here in the street upon a stage
Two shabby Harelquins engage

\(^{54}\) This is in reference only to the character as he was played in France. While some of these changes influenced the Italian Pulcinella as he was played in the north (mostly in Venice), the southern, Neapolitan Pulcinella was not affected by this transformation, whether in actor or puppet form.

\(^{55}\) Italian puppet theatre was in the process of making a long comeback after a Medieval Age hibernation. By the seventeenth century in Italy, it was the custom for noblemen to have their own puppet theatres “in which refined and cultured plays were performed” (Byrom 2). The popularity and notice given to this genre is shown in the performances of the knight Filippo Acciaiuoli. Besides performing in his private theatre, he also produced shows for the houses of ambassadors, cardinals, the Queen of Sweden, and even for the Pope. Professional troupes also began organizing and touring and in 1884, Ferrigni’s La Storia dei Burratini (published in the Florentine periodical Fieramosca) stated the following: At the moment of writing, more than four hundred marionette companies large and small, happily put up their tents on Italian soil in the dazzling August sunshine…I speak here only of proper productions of marionettes from the most complete to the least so; people who carry on the business with a small capital, traveling from city to city, putting on a show by arrangement on the stage of some regular theatre, and giving a programme of plays…According to my calculations, which are based on a very moderate estimate, Italy today contains a population of about forty thousand performing puppets, about whom the last census makes no mention whatever!

\(^{56}\) The close connection between la commedia dell’arte and Italian puppet theatre is emphasized by their continued relationship today. At L’improvvisa, a modern international commedia dell’arte festival held every year in Cotignola, Italy, some of the performances include these hybrid performances, with both masked and puppet commedia dell’arte characters performing together.
The passers-by to pause and gape
At the droll antics of their ape.
We pay our penny, and we go
Inside to see the puppet show:
But while, within, we wait and stand,
We’re pushed and elbowed, squeezed and jammed,
As stiff as pasteboard queens and kings,
Until at last the play begins (qtd in Speaight 20)

In Italy, Pulcinella had been one of the many characters used in the burratini
performances, but the new Polichinelle quickly became heralded in France as the ‘chief
hero of the marionette stage’. Described as this “little wooden Aespo, twisting, twirling,
turning, dancing, laughing, and talking – this eccentric grotesque, this ludicrous
hunchback, names Polichinelle…[was] received like a noble citizen in Paris” (Speaight
20). However, the prowess of Polichinelle, combined with the original Pulcinella
tradition, found its lasting and most influential home as he journeyed across the channel
to the English stage.

Documentation of commedia dell’arte troupes in England exist as early as the
1570’s, though the remoteness of the island, with its difficult accessibility, difficult
permit clearance, refusal of the female company members on stage, and the resistance to
foreign influences on their efficiently organized native theatre resulted in a failure to
penetrate deeply into the English world. English players, also wary due to the troupes
known popularity in rival France, believed themselves superior to the Italian players that
had been painted as mere *farceurs* by English writers, such as this 1592 *Pierce Penilesse* publication:

> Our Player are not as the players beyond the sea, a sort of squirting baudie Comedians, that have Whores and common Curtizans to playe womens partes\(^{57}\), and forbeare no immodest speech, or unchast action they may procure laughter, but our Sceane is more stately furnisht than ever it was in the time of Roscius\(^{58}\), our representations honorable and full of gallant resolution, not consisting like theirs of a Pantaloun, a Whore, and a Zanie, but to Emperours, Kings and Princes, whose true tragedies they do vaunt. (Nashe 27, original spelling)

Further complications arose with the closing of the theatres in 1647 due to Oliver Cromwell’s Commonwealth rule. Troupes were prohibited to perform in England and forced into exile. However, the adaptive style of *la commedia dell’arte*, and particularly the draw of the Pulcinella character, created a means by which the English people could finally resonate and identify with their performances.

With the restoration of Charles II to the throne in 1660, theatres reopened their doors and, according to a contemporary broadside “little children did much rejoice; and ancient people did clap their hands, saying golden days began to appear” (Speaight 39). Samuel Pepys, a renowned diarist of the Restoration period, noted in his diary a visit to Covent Garden where he saw “an Italian puppet play, that is within the rails there, which very pretty, the best that ever I saw, and great resort of gallants” (9 May 1662). That

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\(^{57}\) The English view of women on stage is related to the Council of Trent (1545-63), a counter-Reformation move that solidified their opinion of Italian licentiousness.

\(^{58}\) Quintus Roscius Gallus (c126-62 BC), one of Rome’s most famous actors and student of delivery and gesture. A good friend of Cicero, the two often engaged in friendly debate about whether the actor or the orator could express thought and emotion more poignantly.
same puppeteer, “Signor Bologna, alias Pollicinella”, performed before the King at Whitehall in October of that same year, with the Lord Chamberlain sending for a gold chain and medal worth twenty five pounds in order to pay him. Bologna’s work as Pulcinella, who had established himself as an amusing, masked, hook-nosed clown across Europe\textsuperscript{59}, thrust the \textit{commedia dell’arte} characters into the English puppet theatres\textsuperscript{60}.

After shortening his name to a manageable “Punch”, the English stage proceeded to transform Pulcinella (taking aspects from the French Polichinelle) into a verifiable English character, with his comedy developing around their use of irony and giving free “rein to all the cold-blooded ferocity which he had stored up” (Duchartre 224). Playing mostly in the fairs and to the common people (and to the particular delight of children), his character became easily identifiable as the hunchback and protruding belly became more pronounced, along with the hooked nose and chin. His comedy focused on the vulgar, the beatings, and the boasting of victory, bringing in the English tradition of the loud-mouthed Vices of the morality plays and the clown of the Elizabethan stage. His costume became codified, discarding the traditional white Italian costume in favor of the red and yellow English jester costume with big buttons, his neck covered by a ruff, a high hat on his head, and a beating stick always in hand. A human Punch, in the 1730’s


\textsuperscript{60} Puppet theatre in England is documented back to the Middle Age, and routinely show the intrusion of a comic local character as shown in the following description of a resurrection play at Witney, in Gloucestershire:

The priest garnished out certain small puppets, representing the persons of Christ, the Watchman, Mary and others, amongst which one bore the part of a waking Watchman (espying Christ to rise) made a continual noise, like to the sound that is caused by the meeting of two sticks, and was thereof commonly called Jack Snacker of Witney.

Interestingly enough, the puppet theatres were the one exception to the restrictions on theatre during the Commonwealth, continuing in practice without interruption.
A page from “Punch and Judy” in Aunt Louisa’s National Album, c. 1870 and “Punch and Columbine” from George Bickham’s The Musical Entertainer c. 1740

performance of Ned Ward’s The Prisoners’ Opera at Sadler’s Wells describes himself as this:

My cap is like to a sugar loaf,
And round my collar I wear a ruff;
I’d strip and show you my shapes in buff,
But fear the ladies would flout me.

My rising back and distorted breast,

Where e’er I show him, become a jest;

As as for what is below my waist,

No lady need ever doubt me. (qtd in Speaight 67)

His recognizable and consistent identity, and the growing love of the English people of this character is shown through the fact that when the Italian performers were, once again, exiled from England for one hundred years in 1688, Punch remained as a leading character in the English theatre. Jonathan Swift describes the phenomenon in his poem *Mad Mullinix and Timothy* (1728):

Observe the audience is in pain,

While Punch is hid behind the scene;

But when they hear his rusty voice,

With what impatience they rejoice!

And then they value not two straws,

How Solomon decides the cause

Which the true mother, which pretender,

Nor listen to the witch of Endor;

Should Faustus, with the Devil behind him,

Enter the stage, they never mind him;

If Punch, to stir their fancy, shows

In at the door his monstrous nose…
The tradition of Punch, solidified with the writing and dissemination of *The Punch and Judy Show* (original title, *The Tragical Comedy or Comical Tragedy of Punch and Judy*, 1828) by John Payne Collier, escalated into him becoming the “British National Puppet” (Sommerville). With the complete adaptation and integration of Punch into British theatre and mainstream culture, the *commedia dell’arte* succeeded in overcoming England’s original resistance of the Italian theatre, increasing its popularity and proving to be an integral part of the immerging theatrical traditions\(^6\).

**Pierrot in France**

Perhaps the best example of the adoption, integration and lasting success of a *commedia dell’arte* character by a foreign audience is that transformation of the Italian Pedrolino to the French Pierrot. With the long standing success of *commedia dell’arte* in France, the ability of the French to transform a leading player, making him their own, and then subsequently creating a lasting tradition of the character both in *commedia dell’arte* and in their own theatre, is unsurpassed by any other.

In the family-based troupes, the youngest son was usually assigned the role of Pedrolino, the young, charming, personable and trustworthy valet. Initially Pedrolino served as the barker that would draw crowds to the show, acquiring a reputation of being “slight and rather clumsy” through his responsibility of drawing the easy laugh, to “soften up the audiences as it were, to prance and fall from the tight-rope” and often hurting himself to keep the crowd amused until the more seasoned performers came on stage

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\(^6\) The overt success of Punch is shown in his continuous evolution. The “Family” of Punch includes the following offspring, puppets evolved from Punch but adapted to fit their countries cultures: Holland, Jan Klassen; Greece, Karaghiozis; Turkey, Karagoz; Germany, Kasper; Austria, Kasperl; Belgium, Tchantches.
(Dick 29-30). The recipient of much abuse and mockery by both the other players and
the audience, he was a miserable and pitiful creature.

However, this wretched place as the lowest of commedia dell’arte characters
began to evolve as, in the struggle for survival, the character began to rely on small tricks
and dodges (anything to avoid beatings and punishment), and turning his pitiable
situation into a favorable position by stressing his “simple-mindedness” – a trait that also
resulted in complete honesty. He ingratiated himself with the master characters

![Pedrolino by Regolo Ricci, 2005](image)

*Fig. 8 Pedrolino by Regolo Ricci, 2005*

(Pantalone, Dottore) and became a confident of the innamorati. By the time of Scala’s
canovacci, he was described as a leading, integral player whose “engaging simplicity and
elegance” endeared him to his masters and to the audience. Possessing a child-like quality, he delighted in practical jokes and pranks, but was unfailingly faithful to his master and was usually the key to solving the problems raised in the plot. His costume emphasized his youth, baggy white clothes (reminiscent of Pulcinella) with a large ruffled collar and big buttons.

The leading player of Pedrolino in France (and elsewhere) was Giovanni Pellesini. Documentation has him playing before the king and court by 1603, and returning to Paris in 1613-14. However, at this point he was eighty-seven years of age, and unable to perform with the “verve and dash” of his younger years (Storey 16). When the troupe became a permanent feature in the Parisian theatrical society (1614-1697), Pedrolino was no longer listed. However, the reputation of the character, along with the printings of Scala’s canovacci and the performances of other troupes, kept the lovable personality in the minds of the audience, and it was the French theatre that would be responsible for the continuation of the Pedrolino tradition. Pedrolino, with his very Italian beginnings, turned out to be “an embryonic Pierrot” (Dick 46).

Based on their original piece performed in 1658, as well as the subsequent version written by Moliere in 1665, the permanent Parisian troupe performed a piece in 1673 called Il Convitato di Pietro which, in the role of Pedrolino, was introduced the new-French version, Pierrot, played by Giuseppe Giaratone. Continuing in his role as valet (usually a servant of Dottore), his personality was “compounded of that engaging mixture of simplicity and intelligence, of independence and naïve candor”, that was Pedrolino’s trademark (Storey 22). He also further developed in his honest tendencies. Moliere wrote Pierrot as a character of great conviction, catching the “constancy of Pierrot’s
symbolism, which is to repeat, to endure, and to repeat yet again what he considers to be the final truth” (Dick 54). Pierrot’s character developed along with his willingness to express his thoughts with complete unselfconsciousness. His costume, while still containing the same trousers and ruff at the neck, slightly evolved, becoming more close-fitting and elegant, with the top taking on a recognizable long white jacket that was slightly fluted at the bottom and buttoned at the front (typical of the French peasant), and the white hat becoming soft and flat, set back on his head. He was also un-masked, with his face becoming covered by a white powder. Giaratone, through the course of his long career, continued to work and evolve the mask to the point that, when the Italians were exiled from Paris is 1697 for overstepping their boundaries with the King and he retired,
Giratone left behind a “disembodied mask, fully naturalized to the French language, culture, and taste” (Dick 34).

Banished from Paris, the troupes began to play among the fairs that were located on the outskirts, described as “immense camps for all displaced persons; a sort of unlicensed territory open to all illegitimate players, vagrants, bohemians, saltimbanques and banished comedians” (Dick 144). Having angered the King, and consequentially losing their royal license, the troupes became targets to constant surveillance and threats by the police. Official informers (disguised as spectators) would watch their performances and report anything subversive, resulting in the performers switching to largely mimed presentations. The ‘Silent’ plays would have notice-boards that stated the play’s intention and direction that were held up by two boys suspended in mid-air by rope. Though the boards laid out the overall storyline and main points, the absence of dialogue allowed for multiple “understandings” of the performance. While the troupes still played for understanding to the audience through their physical manifestations, the lack of concrete words provided slim evidence for the police who would charge them with subversion.

Pierrot, specifically, caught the investigator’s attention through his delight in confusing the spies. Never knowing the exact meaning of his mime, they nevertheless

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62 The art of pantomime has been present on and off since Ancient Greece (with the first recorded pantomime being in 467 BCE when the dancer Telestes separated himself from the chorus and used gestures and rhythmic step to interpret what was being recited by the Chorus in Aeschylus' Seven Against Thebes). In Paris, with the heavy restrictions on giving permission to acting troupes, theatres would receive licenses to perform shows that were only mimed or acrobatic acts. With their focus on physicality, the use of mime was already very prevalent in the commedia dell’arte shows and with the banishment of the troupes from Paris and the restrictions on using French monologues and dialogue, troupes focused on developing separate pantomime shows that, while using the conventions and characters of commedia dell’arte, were acceptable in Paris. Commedia dell’arte continued to play a large part in the French (as well as English, where they are called harlequinades) pantomime scene.

63 Because of Pierrot’s absolute integration into French culture, Pierrot the character is spoken off as an autonomous person, with the actor (except in the case of Jean-Gaspard Deburau) being largely ignored.
knew that it was subversive and intended to cause the audience members to mock and jeer the authorities. Again, the character’s characteristic honesty, the need to tell the truth, turned him into a symbol for the people of France, representing the “lot of the French peasantry, neglected and forgotten by ‘les Seigneurs de Versailles’” (Dick 146). A song was developed in 1712, talking about the light that had been burnt out by their banishment and his right to the pen. Entitled *Au Clair de la Lune (Under the Moonlight)*, the lyrics are as follows:

> Au clair de la lune
> 
> Mon ami Pierrot
> 
> Prête-moi ta plume
> 
> Pour écrire un mot
> 
> Ma chandelle est morte
> 
> Je n’ai plus de feu
> 
> Ouvre-moi ta porte
> 
> Pour l’amour de Dieu

> Under the moonlight,
> 
> My friend Pierrot
> 
> Lend me your pen,
> 
> So I could write a word
> 
> My candle is out,
> 
> I’ve no more light
Open your door for me,
For God’s sake.

Pierrot was becoming a symbol, a light to the people that were frustrated by the situation of their country, their nobility, and their situation in life.

The return of the commedia dell’arte troupes into the good graces of the King, and the subsequent “height” of the genre in France, revolved around the troupes bowing and yielding to the wills of the sovereignty. Pierrot, as a developing character, vacillating among interpretations, began to lose his voice and his place of symbolism for the French people. However, his voice would be again found, strengthened, and solidified by the life work of Jean-Gaspard Deburau (called Baptiste), a mime that Theophile Gautier (a leading contemporary French poet, dramatist, novelist, journalist and literary critic) would hail as the ‘most perfect actor who ever lived’ (Storey 25). Deburau’s interpretation of this character in the French pantomime became the Pierrot that the French people recognized and identified with, claiming him as their own.

Deburau was obsessed with the symbolism of Pierrot, to the point that he is said to have literally turned into the character off-stage, with his life becoming a fusion of imagination and reality. During his apprenticeship with a theatre on the Boulevard, one night he was given the role of a revenant and, according to fellow mime Séverin, when making himself up:

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64 Gautier’s love and delight in Deburau’s Pierrot is shown in his extensive writings about the performances that he continuously frequented, as shown in the following excerpt:
We habitually occupied a ground-floor stage box, somewhat like a drawer of a chest, and Pierrot was so accustomed to see us that he never sat down to a single banquet on stage without giving us our portion of it. What slices of bread smeared with grape jam he cut for us! Those were wonderful times… (Shakespeare aux Funambules, 4 September 1842)

65 The impact of Deburau’s interpretation of Pierrot is beautifully portrayed in the film Les Enfants du Paradis (1945).

106
Before giving his eyes and cheeks a sunken look, [Deburau] saw that his facies had taken on an interesting aspect...he powdered the shine of his white greasepaint to a perfect whiteness and dullness. Something was lacking in this mask. What? The eyebrows and eyes accentuated with black. That was better already. What more? Some rouge on the lips to off-set the white. Better and better, already captivating, and yet it wasn’t complete. What had to be added? Ah! the black skullcap of Yacomo’s Harlequin. And oh! miracle! Pierrot was born. The spirit of the mimus albus of Rome had passed into Deburau. (qtd in Dick 56-57).

Along with accentuating of the facial make-up and the changing to the black skullcap Deburau continued to alter the appearance of the character, throwing out the ruff to accentuate the comic aspects of his long and limber neck and replacing the jacket with a cotton blouse, with long and wide sleeves.

Continuing the mute tradition that Pierrot had developed during his time at the fairs, Deburau developed and pushed the character that was seen as “pale as the moon, mysterious as silence, supple and mute as the serpent, straight and tall as the gallows” (Duchartre 260). He also continued to develop Pierrot, reverting back to some of Pedrolino’s daring while rising himself from the dregs of the hierarchy and instilling French air about him with his poetic depiction. Gautier described him as follows:

Pierrot, under the flour and blouse of the illustrious Bohemian, assumed the airs of a master and an aplomb unsuited to his character: he gave kicks and no longer received them; Harlequin now scarcely dared touch him shoulders with his bat; Cassandre would think twice before boxing his ears. He would kiss Columbine
and pass an arm around her waist like a seducer of comic opera; he made the
action revolve around himself alone, and he attained such a degree of insolence
and effrontery that he even beat his own good genius. (qtd in Storey 25)

He ended his role of the valet and, paradoxically, retained a reputation for being tender
and charming while indulging his tendency to bring sometimes violent and sinister
cruelty to the performances (said to be a result of his own temperament and dark life
experiences). 66 Deburau’s interpretation gave credence to the rising school of thought
known as Romanticism, developing Pierrot into “the symbol of the human heart still
white and innocent, tormented by infinite aspirations toward the higher spheres…a
striking emblem of the power of opportunity on already tempted and vacillating minds”
(Souvenirs de theatre 65).

The French audiences embraced and heralded the performances of Deburau’s
Pierrot, priding the character on its genius of improvisation, agility, pantomime, and
ingenuity while basking in his ability to “move his audience, varied as they were, from
laughter to tears and back again, without so much as uttering a word” (Duchartre 260).

With his life on the street, he was a symbol for the artists, while his status as “the ancient
slave, the modern proletarian, the pariah, the passive and dis-inherited being” made him
an icon of Romantic thought (Historire de l’art dramatique 24). The public responded to
the fact that he played the paradox of what was and what was not. He could be both the
poet and the people, happy or sad, energetic and ill, while establishing himself as the

66 His biographer, Tristan Rémy, states that Deburau was:

neither gay nor sinister…the face and gestures of Jean-Gaspard showed, each time a scene gave
him occasion, that he was reckoning with a world that he made laugh at will, he whom the world
had never made laugh. His liberated rancor burst out on stage especially when, under his floured
mask, he expressed his whole personality. Only in this way could he reveal those parts of himself
that he kept contained. The bottle whose label “Laudanum” he smilingly revealed after Cassandre
had drained it, the back of the razor he passed over the old man’s neck, were toys which he could
not be allowed to take seriously and thus put to the test his patience, his reserve, his sang-froid.
spirit of the people, changing his mood as they changed theirs. He was what the French
call a *flaneur*, one who is “not quite an idler nor quite a lounger, but rather one who
passively observes what is going on around him as he strolls from place to place, open to
every fresh experience, every new view of a familiar thing, ready to observe the hitherto
unnoticed detail” (Dick 175).

Conclusion

In crossing international boundaries, troupes had the difficult task of staying true
to *commedia dell’arte*’s cultural roots while still appealing to a foreign audience. By
building off of the inherent adaptive qualities of the *commedia dell’arte* style, troupes
were able to increase their popularity, charming the Northern Europeans through the
creation of a common link. While still appealing in its presentation of an exotic Other
theatre form, the integration of local culture and the creation of identifiable characters by
the troupes opened up a way to further communication while establishing the same
connection between audience and character that laid at the heart of their popularity in
Italy. The identification of these changes, and the recognition of the adaptive spirit of
*commedia dell’arte*, is an important key in understanding how *commedia dell’arte* can
continue to serve in modern theatre, not only in entertaining today’s audience but in
creating a method of communication and understanding across cultural and linguistic
boundaries. As theatre practitioners in the twentieth century have continued to integrate
and adapt the elements of *commedia dell’arte* into their own work, they have re-
discovered valuable tools in creating a modern theatre that excites today’s audiences.
Chapter Five: Commedia’s Renaissance

“In the Commedia dell’Arte the Italians of the late 16th century gave to future generations a hint as to the possibilities of the Art of the Theatre.”


Vsevolod Meyerhold, in his journal entitled *The Love for Three Oranges* (1914-1916), called for a return of the theatre as art. This return, with an emphasis on the theatricality of the stage, revolved around an understanding and integration of *commedia dell’arte*, which he called the “theatre of the mask”. He wrote that the “theatre of the mask” which:

has always been a fairground show, and the idea of acting based on the apotheosis of the mask, gesture and movement is indivisible from the idea of the travelling (sic) show. *Those concerned in reforming the contemporary theatre dream of introducing principles of the fairground booth into the theatre.* (134, emphasis mine)

Meyerhold’s works recognized the potential of the theatrical characteristics of the classical *commedia dell’arte*, and strove to reintroduce those principles of the “fairground booth” to modern audiences. However, beyond the simple integration of these elements (mask, gesture, movement as well as characters, situations and improvisation), the success of Meyerhold and others, and the continued ability of modern practitioners to tap into the power of *commedia dell’arte* in today’s theatre, revolves directly around their
recognition of the adaptive qualities that provided the foundation of its huge popularity during the Renaissance.

As previously shown, the success of the troupes, both at home and abroad, depended on their ability to adjust to the situations of the audiences. Capitalizing on their inherently improvisational creative process, troupes developed their performance techniques, characters and subjects around the needs of the audiences, creating a mode of communication that crossed linguistic and cultural boundaries. This practice of constant adaptation and change feeds directly into what scholars call the “spirit of commedia”, or the essence of the genre. Used throughout commedia dell’arte studies, this spirit of commedia defines the separation between the actual historical genre and the performance methods that it inspires. While it “includes worthy attempts at correct historical recreation, it also allows for innovation, experiment and application to other, perhaps modern, themes. It has proved a fertile source of inspiration for all types of…theatre” (Grantham 4-5).

It is this spirit of commedia that Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936), Italy’s first internationally important playwright after the eighteenth century, says influenced the theatre that emerged in Europe during (and after) the Renaissance. He claims that the plays of Shakespeare, Molière, Lope de Vega and others were outgrowths of the Italian matrix. However, other than just borrowing characters, scenes and situations, the actual “truth is that all these great authors, these originators of European Theatre, had appropriated – without being aware of it – something quite different: the very spirit of our Theatre” (Pirandello 23). It is this spirit, the willingness of the genre to adapt to the needs and situations of its audience, which allows commedia dell’arte to continue to be
an important aspect of modern theatre, crossing not only linguistic and cultural
boundaries, but in reaching audiences that are also separated by time from the original
Renaissance performances.

The very nature of the spirit of commedia forces a realization that the ability of
commedia dell’arte to work on a modern stage will depend on the necessary distinctive
use of each artist and culture. However, in his seminal work The Theatre of Yesterday
and Tomorrow: Commedia dell’Arte on the Modern Stage (1992), James Fisher
recognizes that overall, the use and “rediscovery” of commedia dell’arte in the twentieth
century was born mainly out of a search for “liberation from the pervasiveness of
Realism…energiz[ing] a new theatrical revolution, moving the theatre away from
Realism toward a new theatricalism” (10-11). Martin Green and John Swan, authors of
The Triumph of Pierrot (1986), explain that for twentieth century artists, commedia
dell’arte “is not an idea or a meaning, but a collection of images with many meanings”
(xiii). The spirit of commedia enables each artist to use, adapt and integrate the elements
that s/he feels are necessary and useful in communicating to and serving their audiences.
Some have chosen to resurrect the historical genre, recreating it “correctly” to educate
and delight a modern audience (Max Reinhart). Others have used it to promote political
and social reform (Dario Fo, the San Francisco Mime Troupe, Meyerhold). Still others
have used it to readdress acting, directing and other basic theatre practices (Edward
Gordon Craig, Meyerhold, Jacques Copeau).

Despite their unique and differing purposes in creating theatre, these (and other)
artists, have recognized the distinct ability of the commedia dell’arte to communicate and
appeal to their audiences. This continual practice of adapting the characters, staging
techniques and performative elements of commedia dell’arte, after the manner of the original troupes and directly for contemporary audiences, reaffirms the potential power of the genre in modern theatre. This renaissance of commedia dell’arte, serving as a source of inspiration for theatrical artists will be, as Craig asked for, “an affectionate whisper from the dead: nothing dry about it, nothing boisterous; something beautiful, exciting and full of promise” (Editorial Notes 51).

Playing with the Audience

“We then played the city parks..., attracting young people, old people, children and dogs. The plays changed considerably, became broader, more directly involved with the audience, as the audience itself became an ‘improviso’ element, shifting, moving, and responding.”


While varying in their uses of commedia dell’arte techniques, practitioners who chose to implement this genre agree that their driving reason for integration and adaptation lies in the unique relationship established between performer and spectator, and their ability to incorporate contemporary concerns and issues. Because of this, the most important task of the modern practitioner is to foster that relationship, dissolving the normal separation established in a theatrical performance.

Breaking the barrier between actor and audience calls for the antithesis of naturalistic or realistic theatre, when actors create a ‘fourth wall’. This fourth wall creates an invisible barrier, allowing the audience to peek unobtrusively into the lives of the characters. The actors, in effort to foster the illusion, never acknowledged the
presence of the audience, creating a separate and distinct, but believable reality.

_Commedia dell’arte_, instead of trying to _create_ reality chooses instead to _accept_ reality and the fact that there are people there, watching. Characters make frequent use of direct communication to the audience, addressing them in monologues and asides, while encouraging them to talk back. Whether demanding sympathy, asking advice or imploring them to keep a secret, the characters not only invite the audience to enter into the world of imagination that they are creating, but insist that they become an active part.

Dario Fo (1926 - ) recognizes the importance of the audience being participants in his productions in order to more effectively communicate his specific agenda. An internationally recognized playwright, actor and activist (having both won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1997 and jailed for subversion), Fo and his wife, Franca Rame (1929 - ) are committed to the idea of political theatre, using heavy satire to examine government, industry and the problems of the middle and lower classes. Fo also builds his performance directly out of improvisation, saying that “the choice of an improvisation form of theatre is already a political one – because improvisational theatre is never finished, never a closed case, always open-ended” (qtd in Fisher 53). The use of improvisation allows Fo to frequently update the topics and issues of his plays, most often drawing his subjects from the headlines and popular culture, making them continuously pertinent to the member of his audience. He emphasizes through this work the significant role of the audience, his necessary interaction with them, and the imperative needs for the audience to be engaged in the subject of the play in order for his comedy to be a success:
The comic fished for laughs by virtually throwing out a comic line, or a hook, into the audience. He indicates where the audience’s reaction has to be gathered in and also virtually where the hook is cast, because otherwise the tension built up between stage and audience would die down. Winding in the hook doesn’t mean snuffing out the audience reaction, but correcting its flow with a flick of the rod. The comic’s ability lies in knowing that if he carries on for a while on the same tack he’ll snap the audience’s capacity to keep up with his theme. So he breaks into the stage action, using something extraneous (a spectator’s funny way of laughing, for example, or imitating the way La Malfa\(^{67}\) speaks)... *All popular theatre requires the audience to be ‘inside’, and take part in the rhythm of laughter.* (qtd in Mitchell 15-16, emphasis added)

Fo incorporates this in his satirical retelling of the Biblical miracle when Jesus turned water into wine. Though performed and written in a monologue style, Fo specifically works to create a dialogue between himself and the audience, talking to them directly, inserting intentional narrative breaks, and improvising based off of their responses\(^{68}\). In his performance, Fo presents two competing storytellers (both played by himself) – an angel who tells the “official” version and a drunk who claims that he was there. Through the drunk’s retelling he invites, literally, the audience to feel, smell and taste the wine with him. Speaking to the audience directly, he uses these stories to argue his point that drinking could not be a sin, claiming that Jesus would never have offered wine to His mother if it was wrong. He strengthens his argument by saying that Adam

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\(^{67}\) Ugo La Malfa, former leader of the Italian Republican Party

\(^{68}\) Fo trains his student actors in this method by asking them to do monologues. Then he sits as an audience member and responds vocally after each line. The student learns to respond and react accordingly, turning the monologue into a dialogue (Jenkins 178-179).
and Eve would never have been tempted to eat the fruit if there had been wine to drink in
the garden, claiming that if Adam had been like him, a drunk, then the human race would
still be in Paradise. After the drunk acts out Adam’s rejection of the serpent in favor of a
glass of wine, the drunk (Fo) tilts the glass of wine in salute to the audience, thanking
them for their involvement (Jenkins 178-9).

Playing with the audience also allows the audience to increase the humor of the
situation. When I directed a production of Scala’s *L’amico fedele* (The Faithful Friend)
(2007), there was a moment when Oratio (the *innamorato*), in learning that he has lost his
love, decides that his only course of action is suicide. I directed the actor to have three
ways in which he tried to (ineffectively) kill himself, with the second try consisting of his
handing his sword to an audience member and asking him/her to “do the deed”. Most
nights, the audience member laughed, refused and gave the sword back, giving him a
chance to throw out an insulting quip at their “ineffectiveness”. However, on closing
night, the girl chosen took the sword and ran away, “hiding” it from the actor so that he
couldn’t go through with it. Since having the sword on stage was imperative to the
continuation of the plot (with the Oratio’s “faithful friend” Flavio rushing on stage and
stopping him on his last attempt), the actor had to find a way to get the sword back on
stage. The resulting situation brought the greatest laughter from the audience who
recognized and appreciated the unique scene that was developed out of their actions.
The ultimate success of audience involvement lies in the actors having a specific and personal knowledge of the spectators. The audience is not treated as a mass, but as individuals. Barry Grantham, in his *Playing Commedia: A Training Guide to Commedia Techniques* says that:

You must know where the good-looking man/woman is sitting, where the old woman, where the child. When you address the audience you must address your lines to them. Not at “Them” – the great amorphous mass of an audience – but to the old woman, the child, the handsome creature in the third row. (115)

By individualizing the audience you invite each one to personally become involved with the production (both literally and figuratively), forcing them to be active respondents. In return, it forces the performers to adapt to each individual performance, incorporating the
specific quirks, ideas and responses of the audience members. The resulting theatre is lively, interactive and has a spirit of playfulness that coincides with the classical *commedia dell’arte* performances.

**Characters**

“[Let’s] invent a dozen modern, synthetic characters of great extension, representing personalities, faults, passions, moral, social, and personal absurdities of today...I already see three of these personages...the Intellectual (doctor, philosopher, professor, etc), the Agent (or representative) (deputy, minister, electoral agent, grocery merchant, etc) the Adolescent (the child in his family, the schoolboy, the suitor, the artist, the soldier, in short the “idealist”, Pierrot’s grandson”

- Jacques Copeau, in a letter to Louis Jouvet, (1916)

The relationship between actor and audience is strengthened when the actor presents a character that is recognizable and identifiable to the audience. As previously discussed, the evolution of Italian stock characters through with the assimilation of both native and foreign characteristics created personalities that became symbols and delights to audiences at home and abroad. The fact that stock characters were used most heavily in comedies supported the ideas of Goldoni, who wrote that comedy was “created to correct vice and ridicule bad customs; when the ancient poets wrote comedies in this manner, the common people could participate, because, seeing the copy of a character on stage, each found the original either in himself or in someone else” (*Teatro Comico* 31). The modern practitioner can use both adapted established characters as well as
developing new characters that appeal specifically to the audience that they are performing for.

Carlo Mazzone-Clementi, founder of The Dell’Arte School of Mime and Comedy in California, points out the continual effectiveness of stock characters in this type of modern theatre, saying that theatre “that points out our human frailties and foibles in such an honest, unpretentious way, a theatre in which actors are skillful, perceptive, inventive, united, generous, seems to me to be much needed today. In a world gone mad, who has more to say to us than the zanies?” (64). While the ability of the zanni to communicate effectively is, no doubt, connected to the fact that they are the most popular character to interpret, all of stock characters have the ability to be effective today, either working to evolve the established characters, through the creation of new, pertinent archetypes, or in simple presentation of the original form.

Meyerhold specifically took the character of Pierrot and adapted him to work on the Russian stage. An unabashed theatricalist, Meyerhold’s work was fundamentally political, and he experimented with many of the classical and ritualized genres of the world in his search for his own style and technique. Joining the company of the Moscow Art Theatre in 1898, he chaffed under their emphasis on realism and eventually left for good in 1906 in order to have the freedom to experiment with his theories, eventually becoming director of the Imperial Theatre in St. Petersburg in 1908. It was during that time of dissatisfaction that Meyerhold first incorporated commedia dell’arte into his performance, with the 1903 production of Franz von Schöbthan’s circus melodrama, The Acrobat. Meyerhold’s character, Landowski, was a tragic clown and proved to be the
“embryonic vision of Meyerhold’s Pierrot” (Fisher 115), which he would continue to develop through subsequent plays.

While recognizable as the French character in appearance, Meyerhold changed many aspects of his actual personality. Meyerhold viewed Pierrot as the butt of life’s cruelest jokes, and while still playing him inexplicably sad, Meyerhold dispatched with Pierrot’s delicacy and preciousness, making him instead impudent, detached and ironic – while still appealing to the audience. In his production of Alexander Blok’s *The Fairground Booth* (1906), Meyerhold officially started what was recorded as his “wonderful interpretation of the melancholy dreamer Pierrot” (qtd in Moody 862).

*Fig. 11 Vsevold Meyerhold as Pierrot in his 1906 production of Alexander Blok’s The Fairground Booth*
Placing the show booth as far forward on the stage as possible, he emphasized the reality that “this whole sham world of cardboard, twine, canvas and gilt is ripe for destruction”, when Pierrot, in trying to jump through the window of the booth, crashed through the paper and landed on the stage. The booth was then flown clear, leaving Pierrot alone on stage. In response to the laughter due to the *lazzi* elements of the moment, Pierrot turned to the audience and said “I feel very sad. And you laugh?” (Hoover 239). While, Pierrot would reproach the audience throughout the show, in words and in looks, he was also very introspective, with moments when he would wear “a strange expression, gazing intently into his own soul” (qtd in Fisher 119). Blok, in latter letter to Meyerhold, wrote that in his playing of Pierrot, Meyerhold had grasped the *commedia dell’arte* spirit. (Moody 861)

While the familiar *commedia dell’arte* characters continue to be represented on stage (with specific attention given to Arlecchino, Columbina, Pierrot and Pulcinella), other practitioners have returned to the essence of the idea of stock characters, creating and developing new personalities that speak specifically to their audiences and for their purposes, representing the basic human behaviors, classes and professions while embodying the hopes, needs and dreams of the audience. Their interest, as the San Francisco Mime troupe says, in “this 16th-century form is not antiquarian: we use it because it is popular, free, engaging, and adaptable” (Shank 112).

The San Francisco Mime Troupe was organized in 1959 under the direction of R.G. Davis. Emerging in the political radicalism that swept San Francisco in the 1960’s, the Mime Troupe had a strong desire to “reach the American Everyman”, and
incorporated \textit{commedia dell’arte} techniques because “the intrinsic nature of commedia dell’arte is its working-class viewpoint” (Davis 31). While their original works were “updates” of old Italian works, the troupe searched to adapt the genre to fit less with an Italian past and more with an American present. The partial answer they found was, in the continued, but modified, use of stock characters, which they found as key in reaching their audience.

We discovered that the stereotypical characters operated both as an escape valve for irritation and as an integrating force. To the liberal, they often appear to show prejudice. However, if you dig the people and the contradictions, the stereotypes are more accurate in describing social conditions than bland generalities. We eventually learned in commedia,…,how to make stereotypes carry the burden of social satire” (Davis 32)

Joan Holden, who wrote the Mime Toupe’s 1970 production \textit{The Independent Female, or A Man Has His Pride!}, says that they “found American stereotypes that can be used in the same way as the commedia stereotypes – the capitalist, the young naïve man, the strong woman” (Shank 113). A women’s liberation play, the characters consisted of archetypes that were familiar to their audience and representative of the social issue they were presenting. Gloria, the leading lady who is ‘confused about her role as a woman’, John, her masochist husband who wants a ‘wife, not a business partner’, Sarah, the strong feminist who believes that ‘femininity is a drug to make [women] slaves’, and the President of the Chamber of Commerce, Sarah’s husband and the big capitalist. The ending speech, made by Gloria and spoken directly to the audience, was an appeal for women’s rights and power in San Francisco.
This is not to say that the original characters cannot be effectively used. In my first experience directing a *commedia dell’arte* show, *Good Impressions* (2005), the goal of the production was archival: to re-create an “authentic” show for the specific purpose of educating the audience about the genre. Early on in the rehearsal process, and in the dramaturgical discussions held post-show, the issue of whether the production would be more effective by contemporizing it was addressed. The cast of characters consisted a typical small *commedia dell’arte* troupe with two *innamorati* (Spavento and Flaminia), Pantalone, Arlecchino and Clarice (a female *zanni*), and the costuming and setting.
remained in Renaissance Italy, with the actors being forbidden to use modern expressions or tell contemporary jokes. In assessing the effectiveness of using the standard characters, the most poignant comment came from a young man who I don’t even know. He raised his hand and expressed his appreciation for this type of work. He then commented that “this performance allowed me to visualize the things that I have studied in history classes, and it made me feel like I could see what it must have been like.” While the characters were, themselves, still foreign, even exotic to the audience, the ability of the stock character to either represent a part of themselves or someone they knew still held true.

Whether through the re-production of the classic characters, their continued adaptation and evolution or the creation of new ones under the spirit of commedia, the
use of stock characters allows modern practitioners to appeal to their audiences. By presenting types that spectators either personally identify with, or in whom they see someone they know, practitioners establish a familiar foundation from which theatrical innovation, political reform, or other agendas have a place to stand.

Masks

“Everything that is profound loves the mask.”
- Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, (1886)

In the classical *commedia dell’arte* tradition, the stock characters were most effectively (and quickly) communicated through their corresponding masks. In the reform of *commedia dell’arte*, Goldoni was quick to remove the mask from the face of the actor, claiming that:

The mask must always inhibit the actor in expressing both joy and grief. Whether the character is making love, irate or jesting he always has the same piece of leather on his face, and however much he gesticulates and varies the tone of his voice, he can never show, by means of those facial expressions which are the heart’s interpreters, the diverse passions agitating his soul. (qtd in Nicoll 208)

The resulting battle between pro-mask and anti-mask resulted in the almost complete disappearance of masks on stage by the late eighteenth century, with only sporadic appearances until the early twentieth century. However, with some practitioners’ focus on theatricality and the ability to find new ways to communicate with, and delight, the
The skillful use of masks has proven to be an effective tool in enhancing performance. The use of masks in order to represent a specific, identifiable personality gives the actor a special ambiguity and complexity in his/her construction of the character. Taking away the majority of the facial expressions, with the half-mask leaving only the mouth and the jaw visible to the audience, the masks permit a “chameleonic diversity in the personality barely hidden under the mask” (Fisher 113). Meyerhold explains as follows:

the mask enables the spectator to see not only the actual Arlecchino before him but all the Arelecchinos who live in his memory. Through the mask the spectator sees every person who bears the merest resemblance to the character…[he] who has mastered the art of gesture and movement (herein lies the power!) manipulates his masks in such a way that the spectator is never in any doubt about the character he is watching: whether he is the foolish buffoon from Bergamo or the Devil. (Meyerhold on Theatre 38)

With the legend of mask work following the idea that the character is transmitted through the mask, along with the physical demands required of the actor in order to communicate effectively through the body, the mask allows the actor to both “be” and “act” the character, while giving specific representations to the audience that they can readily identify. However, while masks are still used for the purpose of character portrayal in the traditional style, the spirit of commedia emphasizes their ability in evoking strange yet beautiful representations.
André Gide, Nobel Prize winner (1947) and literary giant of the early twentieth century, wrote the following about what he called the ‘theatrical situation’:

When one speaks of the history of drama, it is important, perhaps more important than anything else, to ask: Where is the mask? In the audience, or on the stage? In the theater, or in life? It is here or there, never both at one. The most brilliant periods of drama, those in which the mask is triumphant on the stage, are those in which hypocrisy ceases to mask life. On the contrary, those in which what Condorcet calls “the hypocrisy of manner” is triumphant are the very periods in which the mask is snatched from the face of the actor and he is required to be not beautiful but natural; that is to say, if I rightly understand, that he must take his models from reality, or at least from the semblances of it to be seen in his audience; and that is to say, from a monotonous and already masked humanity.

(268-69)

In the desire for theatrical, non-realistic and/or abstract performances, the use of masks on stage gives an immediate and more pronounced emphasis on the realization that this isn’t “real”. This emphasis works directly into the two main principles of abstract work in the theatre. The first is the creation of designed totality through the interrelationships of the elements (staging, music, lighting, movement, etc) and the disillusionment of direct representation. The second is to place emphasis upon the material that creates the work of art, both virtually and theoretically (Kirby 8). The unmasked actor, specifically in the ideas of Edward Gordon Craig, destroyed the ability of abstract theatre to reach its purpose.
Craig (1872-1966) was the first Englishman to see *commedia dell’arte* as a revitalizing force for the modern stage. Born to theatrically minded parents, Craig began acting as a child, but became dissatisfied with the craft. By his mid-twenties he was anxious to develop a “new art of the theatre” (Fisher 77), dabbling in directing, designing and theory. While having some early experiences with a troupe of Pierrots, Craig’s dedication to reviving the craft of *commedia dell’arte* largely resulted from spending around 12 years in Florence. Upon returning to London he began to implement his ideas as well as publish them in his journal, *The Mask*.

Craig was a strong advocate of actors using masks, which he called “that paramount means of dramatic expression, without which acting was bound to degenerate” (*The Theatre - Advancing* 118). For Craig, the actor and the mask were inseparable because the true actor “hates the natural. That is why he plays the Role of the Stage. He loves the disguise – the mask” (*Daybook II* 71). Unlike Goldoni, who felt that the limiting factor of the mask crippled the expression of the actor, Craig recognized the control that working within the mask offered. Masks created a symbolic version of a “facial” expression, one that was carefully selected through a process of meditation in order to create the most moving and poignant experience for the audience. Masks eliminated the “free” facial expression of the actor, the unplanned and unconscious movements and gesture (what Craig called being “over-full of fleeting expressions – frail, restless, disturbed, disturbing”) and the actor who knew how to work within the mask could capitalize on this selectivity, with the masks carrying “conviction when he who creates them is an artist, for the artist limits the statements which he places upon these masks” (*The Theatre Advancing* 121).
Working with a mask, and specifically with the half-mask required by commedia dell’arte (which gives more expression by not blocking off the entire face and allows the freedom of non-garbled speech), requires an awareness of the rest of the body. Actors cannot act ‘naturally’ or even stand up straight, as normal standing and movement ruins the effect of the mask (and looks ‘wrong’ to the audience). Posing, exaggerated gesture and the juxtaposition of stillness and movement must be incorporated throughout the performance. However, this requires that the actor learn to be specific in his movements. Wearing the mask emphasizes every movement and the actor must be disciplined to not fidget, let the head loll about, or move in any indecisive way. Actors also cannot rely on the written text, learning instead to communicate emotions, thoughts and ideas more expressly through the body (Grantham 114-115).

Because of the tie between the character and the mask, the actor must work with the mask from the beginning stages of the rehearsal process. While directing, the first time my actors are given their masks is one of the most important days in the early rehearsal process. They are put in a circle, facing outward so that they feel like they are alone in the room. Then each actor is given their mask and told to study it, memorizing every detail of the “face” that is before them. Once the actor is completely familiar with the mask, s/he is invited to put the mask on and to look around the room through the eyes of the character, seeing things as the character would. The last step of the process involves them moving around the room, taking on the poses, walk, mannerisms and eventually the voice that is dictated by the mask. After every possibility is explored (standing, moving at different speeds, conveying different emotions and, in later
rehearsals, interacting with the other characters), the actor again finds a space where s/he is alone and can disconnect from the mask, returning to his/her normal self.

Fig. 14 In Faithful Friend (2007) mask rehearsals, Pedrolino plays with his faces while Arlecchino and Pantalone work on their physical relationship.
Because of the heightened focus on the body and the abilities of the actor, performing in the style or spirit of *commedia dell’arte* requires a different type and trained actor. Modern practitioners, in their efforts to use the techniques and elements of this genre, have come to a widespread recognition of the central importance of the actor in the performance process and the necessity of the actor to be trained in a manner that allows him/her to perform in this type of improvised, physical masked theatre.

**Training the Actor**

*“The cast...acted in true Commedia dell’Arte tradition on these boards. It was a perfect performance.”*  
- Augusta Adler, on Max Reinhardt’s production of *The Servant of Two Masters*, (1924)

Just as the original performances of *commedia dell’arte* required a new type of acting style, the adaptation and incorporation of *commedia dell’arte* into today’s theatre begs a reexamination of the training of the modern actor. The physical, vocal, creative and collaborative requirements that are essential for the actor to perform in a way that continuously plays with the audience, relies heavily on improvisation, creates identifiable stock characters and effectively uses a mask necessitates a school of training that produces actors who can create theatre that embraces its theatricality.

Jacques Copeau (1870-1949), recognized as “the greatest force in the French theatre of the twentieth century” (Macgowan and Melnitz 476), was another artist that was dissatisfied with the current trend in his nation’s theatre. Copeau had three main
complaints. First was the blatant commercialism and the tired conventions of the Boulevard theatres, which he described as:

…and an ungovernable commercialism cynically degrad[ing] our stage, thus turning away people of culture. Theatres were monopolized by a handful of entertainers in the pay of shameless merchants…everywhere the same spirit of ‘cabotinage,’ and speculation; everywhere bluff; competition of every kind; display of every nature; parasites living on an art which was dying and for which there was no longer a thought; everywhere impotence, lack of discipline, silliness and ignorance, scorn of the creator, hatred of beauty; production growing more foolish and vain; more and more lenient critics; and the public taste further and further misled. (qtd in Katz 434)

The second complaint was against the star system that had been created, with the veneration of actors to the point that the material created was worthless and the performances were unbalanced. He noted:

As for the Boulevard theatre, they belong to the great “stars” who force their director to make ruinous expenditures, throw stage-productions out of balance, attract the audience’s attention to themselves rather than to the play, and cheapen the playwright’s talent by using their play only as vehicles for their own stardom. (qtd in Katz 432)

Third, was what he called the “heresy of naturalism”, and the dominance of realistic tendencies on the French stage. Scoffing that the term “Ibsenesque” had become “synonymous with incoherence, hermeticism and moroseness” (qtd in Fisher 211),
Copeau rejected realism, saying that “indeed the French theatre is so artificial, rigid and narrow that an entirely new stage is needed to satisfy the spirit of change” (Copeau 9).

Copeau’s solution was to start a new theatre company, called the Vieux-Colombier, whose Manifesto states its purpose as trying to “give back brilliance and grandeur to this art…the love and need of what is well done” (qtd in Katz 434). This theatre company was to pull directly from the spirit of commedia, implementing the characteristics that Copeau felt would have the greatest impact on the theatre that he was striving to develop. On January 21, 1916, André Gide recorded in his diary one of the initial conversations with Copeau about what the company would focus on. Copeau wanted a small company of actors with “enough intelligence, ability and training, to be able to improvise on a given scenario”. Actors capable of “reviving the *commedia dell’arte* in the Italian style”, but who could build off the genre by creating new stock characters “the bourgeoisie, the nobleman, the wine merchant, the suffragette” that would speak to their contemporary audience. Actors who could, with these characters, create individual ways of “speaking, walking and thinking” and while never changing the foundation, could “enrich and amplify [them] continually”. In hearing Copeau’s desires, Gide concluded that “if this project were to get off the ground, I can see it needing, and I would welcome this, a complementary theatre, one which both excite and exalt the performer” (qtd in Rudlin, *Jacques Copeau* 39).

To acquire the actors capable of performing in this style, Copeau, in choosing his first company of actors, worried less about hiring experienced actors and more with finding performers who had an inherent understanding of his desire for theatricality. The performance techniques of *commedia dell’arte* inspired his training methods, leading him
to put an emphasis on the actor which would, in his ideal, create a theatre where his actors could avoid the pretences of France’s modern theatre and enable them to play with the audience in the spirit of commedia. The actors chosen were put through a rigorous training program, designed to increase their awareness and experience with their bodies. The necessary understanding of the actors of their bodies stemmed out of his belief that that actors were to give of their whole selves – and that the only way to give their complete self was to first possess their self.

Actors were first trained in gymnastics, animal movements, musical rhythms and in other body exercises that were largely based on Dalcroze’s eurythmics\(^{69}\), though adapted to be less stiff and unnatural. A visit from the famous Italian clowns, the Fratellini Brothers, in 1922 reemphasized the need of unlimited physical skill, from juggling to tumbling to acrobatics. Physical training was eventually supplemented with extensive work on the voice and imagination of the actors. Only when the complete, overall training was finished did Copeau believe that the actor could let the character take over, saying that the actor did not enter a role, but that the character “approaches that actor, who demands of him all that he needs, who little by little replaces him in his skin. The actor applies himself to leave him a free field” (qtd in Rudlin, *Jacques Copeau* 32).

Copeau also placed great emphasis on improvisation in the rehearsal process in efforts to negate the emergence of a “star”, creating instead an ensemble feel among the company. Duchartre points out that a good improvisator had to immerse himself in the

\(^{69}\) Developed by Emile Jaques Dalcroze (1865-1950), a Dalcroze education focuses on the basic elements of music (pulse, meter, rhythm, phrase, dynamics, tone and form) and recognizes the body (physical movement) as the connection between the ear and the mind. Dalcroze has three main branches, Eurythmics, Solfege and Improvisation. Eurythmics focuses on the whole body and its physical engagement with the musical elements. Ideally, the whole body becomes musical, an instrument that that student can “play”. (Classical Music Conservatory, http://www.cmccanada.com/courses/dalcroze.htm)
heart of his role and, because he never knew what was coming next, honed his instincts to respond instantaneously as the character would. The accomplished improviser learned to practice a self-restraint, keeping his part in balance with the other roles. In the Italian troupes this had developed a spirit of camaraderie in their playing, allowing them to perform under an understanding of mutual cooperation. (Rudlin, *Jacques Copeau* 30). Copeau worked to achieve the same spirit, a type of selfless acting that thrived on interdependence and produced an integrated ensemble that could create smooth, spontaneous works.

The result of his work with the actors created a unique and refreshing experience for his French audiences. Jean Villard-Gilles, a contemporary French actor, after seeing the Vieux-Colombier’s production of Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* in May 1944, stated that “we were afforded some of those rare moments when mind and soul have one accord; and as if touched by a kind of grace we felt ourselves transported by one single flap of a wing towards the eternal peaks” (qtd in Fisher 217). Norman Marshall, another professional actor, wrote that overall, the thing he remembered about Copeau’s productions were:

- their lightness, their grace, and their gaiety. Pictorially they were exquisite because of the skill with which Copeau composed his grouping and movement on the various levels of his stage…But one was never conscious of a producer composing effective groupings for their own sake; they seemed the natural result of the action of the play, just as the movement about the stage had an ease and fluidity which gave the impression that it had been spontaneously created by the actors themselves instead of being the work of the producer. (61-62)
Through the integration and adaptation of *commedia dell’arte* technique in order to achieve his vision of the possibilities of theatre, and his specific, detailed training of his actors in order to create an ensemble that could respond to and perform the demands required of his ideas, Copeau was able to create a new theatre for France, providing them another possibility outside the prevailing world of realism.

Like Copeau, I have come to realize that in order to direct this type of highly theatrical and physical work, the casting decision is based more on creating a troupe that is willing to experiment and train in new ways than in actual experience. When possible,

*Fig. 15* In *The Decameron* (2007) rehearsals, the actors are asked to work together to create animals.

in my own directing work I extend the rehearsal period by an extra week or two, allowing for the ensemble to have time where they can “play” together. Focus is largely given to
physical movement and improvisation, with the goal of creating a safe environment where the actors can release their inhibitions, achieving the next level in creativity. Only the ensemble feels completely comfortable with themselves, their bodies and their fellow actors do I start working with the actual text of the play. However, the games and exercises continue through the entire rehearsal process (usually in the warm-up) to maintain the freedom and camaraderie that was established in the opening week(s). The attention given at the beginning to ensemble work, physical, vocal and creative training results in an atmosphere where the cast is able to take on the demands required by the theatricality of this type of theatre.

**Conclusion**

“It seems to be by far the most interesting experiment now being made in the theatre. It is all based on such desire for moral purity, both in behavior and in the acting profession, and on such highly developed artistic principles that it can really be considered an innovation of our time...I feel that I’m rediscovering ancient secrets and a whole forgotten mystique of production.”

- Antoine Artaud, after going through Charles Dullin’s *commedia dell’arte* training, (1921)

*Commedia dell’arte*, due to the individual, specific aspects that were brought together on the stage, is a unique, vibrant and effective theatrical tool. While created with specific elements and techniques, it is the adaptive quality of the genre, the inherent desire to change according to the situation, needs and desires of the audience that allows
it to communicate effectively to its many audiences, while enhancing the playful spirit that makes it delightful to watch.

The troupes of the Renaissance capitalized on the adaptive nature of the genre to increase their popularity both at home and abroad. Recognizing the divided state of the Italian peninsula, with the great lack of social and national unity, the creation of stock characters that had specific lineages, played off of regional personalities, reputations and languages allowed the audiences from different parts to attach themselves to one specific character, while creating a unified presence on stage that represented “Italy” as a whole. The satirical nature of the characters combined with the reigning ideology of play also made these negative representations not only acceptable to the audiences, but delightful in their presentation.

Abroad, the troupes created a vast international popularity by reaffirming and expanding their adaptive nature. While exploiting their exotic Other status with the Northern Europeans to gain access to cities and courts, creating interest and desire to watch with their initial audiences, the troupes continued to adapt to their foreign situations in order to communicate effectively, establishing a continued demand for the “Italian” theatre. Pushing the improvisation and the physicality, the troupes established a way for the Northern Europeans to understand this “foreign” theatre. The rising popularity and desire to experience things *italianata* also provided an opportunity for the troupes to continue in their tradition of creating stock characters that emerge from a specific, national environment, while opening access for the native populations to integrate *commedia dell’arte* characters, techniques and elements into their own theatres.
As the Renaissance Italian troupes adapted to the circumstance of the audiences, creating characters, performance techniques and staging practices that would enhance their genre while still communicating to their audiences, modern practitioners who participate in commedia dell’arte’s renaissance have the opportunity to continue in the spirit of commedia, adapting the classical genre in their work with modern audiences. This “affectionate whisper from the dead” is a powerful tool in enhancing the inherent theatricality of the stage, creating a “new” theatre that offers more to the audience, allowing them to not only be engaged with but actively involved in the productions that they see. With the international popularity of the historical troupes as evidence of its attractiveness, and the continued work of twentieth century artists that show its contemporary appeal, commedia dell’arte is a genre that, when used in the correct spirit, can serve as a valuable tool for future practitioners in their quests to create theatre that is memorable, appealing and powerful to their audiences.
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